THE GRASS HARP

TRUMAN CAPOTE

The Grass Harp

Published by THE NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

FOR MISS SOOK FAULK
In memory of affections deep and true

*Published by The New American Library
By Arrangement with Random House, Inc*

*The New American Library of World Literature Inc
501 Madison Avenue, New York 22, New York*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

One

WHEN was it that first I heard of the grass harp? Long before the autumn we lived in the China tree, an earlier autumn, then; and of course it was Dolly who told me, no one else would have known to call it that, a grass harp.

If on leaving town you take the church road you soon will pass a glaring hill of bonewhite slabs and brown burnt flowers: this is the Baptist cemetery. Our people, Talbos, Fenwicks, are buried there; my mother lies next to my father, and the graves of kinfolk, twenty or more, are around them like the prone roots of a stony tree. Below the hill grows a field of high Indian grass that changes color with the seasons: go to see it in the fall, late September, when it has gone red as sunset, when scarlet shadows like firelight breeze over it and the autumn winds strum on its dry leaves sighing human music, a harp of voices.

Beyond the field begins the darkness of River Woods. It must have been on one of those September days when we were there in the woods gathering roots that Dolly said: Do you hear? that is the grass harp, always telling a story—it knows the stories of all the people on the hill, of all the people who ever lived, and when we are dead it will tell ours, too.

After my mother died my father, a traveling man, sent me to live with his cousins, Verena and Dolly Talbo, two unmarried ladies who were sisters. Before

FOR MISS SOOK FAULK
In memory of affections deep and true

Published by The New American Library
By Arrangement with Random House, Inc.

The New American Library of World Literature, Inc.
501 Madison Avenue, New York 22, New York

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ze littered with cracked glass, scattered silver-
re a ripped nightgown, one of my mother's, hung
er the banister

Verena's eyes flicked over the debris "Eugene, I
nt a word with you" she said in that hearty, coldly
alked voice and Papa answered "Yes, sit down,
rena I thought you would come"

That afternoon Dolly's friend Catherine Creek
re over and packed my clothes and Papa drove
to the impressive shadowy house on Talbo Lane
I was getting out of the car he tried to hug me,
it I was scared of him and wriggled out of his arms
n sorry now that we did not hug each other Be-
use a few days later on his way up to Mobile, his
r skidded and fell fifty feet into the Gulf When
saw him again there were silver dollars weighting
wn his eyes

Except to remark that I was small for my age, a
nt, no one had ever paid any attention to me, but
w people pointed me out, and said wasn't it sad?
at poor little Collin Fenwick! I tried to look pitiful
cause I knew it pleased people every man in town
ust have treated me to a Dixie Cup or a box of
racker jack, and at school I got good grades for the
st time So it was a long while before I calmed
wn enough to notice Dolly Talbo

and when I did I fell in love

Imagine what it must have been for her when first
came to the house a loud and prying boy of eleven
he skittered at the sound of my footsteps or if there
was no avoiding me folded like the petals of shy lady
ern. She was one of those people who can disguise
hemselves as an object in the room a shadow in the
orner whose presence is a delicate happening She
ore the quietest shoes plain virginal dresses with
... ...ed her ankles Though older than her

that, I'd not ever been allowed into their house. reasons no one ever got quite clear, Verena and father did not speak. Probably Papa asked Verena lend him some money, and she refused, or perha she did make the loan, and he never returned it. can be sure that the trouble was over money, b nothing else would have mattered to them so especially Verena, who was the richest person town. The drugstore, the drygoods store, a h station, a grocery, an office building: all this was h and the earning of it had not made her an woman.

Anyway, Papa said he would never set foot i her house. He told such terrible things about Talbo ladies. One of the stories he spread, Verena was a morphodyte, has never stopped g around, and the ridicule he heaped on Miss D Talbo was too much even for my mother: she him he ought to be ashamed, mocking anyone gentle and harmless.

I think they were very much in love, my and father. She used to cry every time he went a to sell his frigidaires. He married her when she sixteen, she did not live to be thirty. The aftern

to the house. I remember the terror of watchi move up the walk, a whip-thin handsome won

not with f
umble into
er ft a mom
loor and sta

sister, she seemed someone who, like myself, V had adopted. Pulled and guided by the gravity Verena's planet, we rotated separately in the spaces of the house.

In the attic, a slipshod museum spookily p with old display dummies from Verena's drug store, there were many loose boards, and by incl these I could look down into almost any room. D room, unlike the rest of the house, which bu with fat dour furniture, contained only a bed, bureau, a chair: a nun might have lived there, ex cept for one fact: the walls, everything was painted an outlandish pink, even the floor was this color. Whenever I spied on Dolly, she usually was to be seen doing one of two things: she was standing in front of a mirror snipping with a pair of garden shears her yellow and white, already brief hair; either that or she was writing in pencil on a pad of coarse Kress paper. She kept wetting the pencil on the tip of her tongue, and sometimes she spoke aloud a sentence as she put it down: *Do not touch sweet foods like candy and salt will kill you for certain.* Now I'll tell you, she was writing letters. But at first this correspondence was a puzzle to me. After all, her only friend was Catherine Creek, she saw no one else and she never left the house, except once a week when she and Catherine went to River Woods where they gathered the ingredients of a dropsy remedy Dolly brewed and bottled. Later I discovered she had customers for this medicine throughout the state, and it was to them that her many letters were addressed.

Verena's room, connecting with Dolly's by a passage, was rigged up like an office. There was a rolltop desk, a library of ledgers, filing cabinets. After supper, wearing a green eyeshade, she would sit at her

esk totaling figures and turning the pages of her ledgers until even the streetlamps had gone out. Though on diplomatic, political terms with many people, Verena had no close friends at all. Men were afraid of her, and she herself seemed to be afraid of women. Some years before she had been greatly attached to a blonde jolly girl called Maudie Laura Murphy, who worked for a bit in the post office here and who finally married a liquor salesman from St. Louis. Verena had been very bitter over this and said publicly that the man was no account. It was therefore a surprise when, as a wedding present, she gave the couple a honeymoon trip to the Grand Canyon. Maudie and her husband never came back: they opened a filling station nearby Grand Canyon, and from time to time sent Verena Kodak snapshots of themselves. These pictures were a pleasure and a grief. There were nights when she never opened her ledgers, but sat with her forehead leaning in her hands, and the pictures spread on the desk. After she had put them away, she would pace around the room with the lights turned off, and presently there would come a hurt rusty crying sound as though she'd tripped and fallen in the dark.

That part of the attic from which I could have looked down into the kitchen was fortified against me, for it was stacked with trunks like bales of cotton. At that time it was the kitchen I most wanted to spy upon; this was the real living room of the house, and Dolly spent most of the day there chat-

sister she seemed someone who like myself Verena had adopted Pulled and guided by the gravity of Verena's planet we rotated separately in the outer spaces of the house

In the attic a slipshod museum spookily peopled with old display dummies from Verena's dry goods store there were many loose boards and by inching these I could look down into almost any room Dolly's room unlike the rest of the house which bulged with fat dour furniture contained only a bed a bureau a chair a nun might have lived there except for one fact the walls everything was painted an outlandish pink even the floor was this color Whenever I spied on Dolly she usually was to be seen doing one of two things she was standing in front of a mirror snipping with a pair of garden shears her yellow and white already brief hair either that or she was writing in pencil on a pad of coarse Kress paper She kept wetting the pencil on the tip of her tongue and sometimes she spoke aloud a sentence as she put it down *Do not touch sweet foods like candy and salt will kill you for certain* Now I'll tell you she was writing letters But at first this correspondence was a puzzle to me After all her only friend was Catherine Creek she saw no one else and she never left the house except once a week when she and Catherine went to River Woods where they gathered the ingredients of a dropsy remedy Dolly brewed and bottled Later I discovered she had customers for this medicine throughout the state and it was to them that her many letters were addressed

Verena's room connecting with Dolly's by a passage, was rigged up like an office There was a rolltop desk a library of ledgers filing cabinets After supper, wearing a green eyeshade, she would sit at her

d sk totaling figures and turning the pages of her ledgers until even the streetlamps had gone out. Though on diplomatic, political terms with many people Verena had no close friends at all Men were afraid of her, and she herself seemed to be afraid of women Some years before she had been greatly attached to a blonde jolly girl called Maudie Laura Murphy, who worked for a bit in the *post office here* and who finally married a liquor salesman from St. Louis Verena had been very bitter over this and said

Maudie and her husband never came back, they opened a filling station nearby Grand Canyon, and from time to time sent Verena Kodak snapshots of themselves These pictures were a pleasure and a

There were nights when she never opened her ledgers but sat with her forehead leaning in her

tripped and fall n in the dark

That part of the attic from which I could have looked down into the kitchen was fortified against me for it was stacked with trunks like bales of cotton At that time it was the kitchen I most wanted to spy upon this was the real living room of the house and Dolly spent most of the day there chatting with her friend Catherine Creek As a child, an orphan Catherine Creek had been hired out to Mr. Uriah Talbo and they had all grown up together, she and the Talbo sisters there on the old farm that has since become *a railroad depot* Dolly she called Dollyheart, but Verena she called That One She

sister: she seemed someone who, like myself, Verena had adopted. Pulled and guided by the gravity of Verena's planet, we rotated separately in the outer spaces of the house.

In the attic, a slipshod museum spookily peopled with old display dummies from Verena's drygoods store, there were many loose boards and by inching these I could look down into almost any room. Dolly's room, unlike the rest of the house, which bulged with fat dour furniture, contained only a bed, a bureau, a chair: a nun might have lived there except for one fact: the walls, everything was painted an outlandish pink, even the floor was this color. Whenever I spied on Dolly, she usually was to be seen doing one of two things: she was standing in front of a mirror snipping with a pair of garden shears her yellow and white, already brief hair; either that or she was writing in pencil on a pad of coarse Kress paper. She kept wetting the pencil on the tip of her tongue, and sometimes she spoke aloud a sentence as she put it down: *Do not touch sweet foods like candy and salt will kill you for certain.* Now I'll tell you, she was writing letters. But at first this correspondence was a puzzle to me. After all, her only friend was Catherine Creek, she saw no one else and she never left the house except once a week when she and Catherine went to River Woods where they gathered the ingredients of a dropsy remedy Dolly brewed and bottled. Later I discovered she had customers for this medicine throughout the state and it was to them that her many letters were addressed.

Verena's room, connecting with Dolly's by a passage, was rigged up like an office. There was a rolltop desk, a library of ledgers, filing cabinets. After supper, wearing a green eyeshade she would sit at her

desk totaling figures and turning the pages of her ledgers until even the streetlamps had gone out. Though on diplomatic political terms with many people, Verena had no close friends at all. Men were afraid of her, and she herself seemed to be afraid of women. Some years before she had been greatly attached to a blonde jolly girl called Maudie Laura Murphy, who worked for a bit in the post office here and who finally married a liquor salesman from St. Louis. Verena had been very bitter over this and said publicly that the man was no account. It was therefore a surprise when, as a wedding present, she gave the couple a honeymoon trip to the Grand Canyon. Maudie and her husband never came back; they opened a filling station nearby Grand Canyon, and from time to time sent Verena Kodak snapshots of themselves. These pictures were a pleasure and a grief. There were nights when she never opened her ledgers but sat with her forehead leaning in her hands and the pictures spread on the desk. After she had put them away she would pace around the room with the lights turned off, and presently there would come a hurt rusty crying sound as though she'd tripped and fallen in the dark.

That part of the attic from which I could have looked down into the kitchen was fortified against me, for it was stacked with trunks like bales of cotton. At that time it was the kitchen I most wanted to spy upon: this was the real living room of the house, and Dolly spent most of the day there chatting with her friend Catherine Creek. As a child, an orphan, Catherine Creek had been hired out to Mr. Uriah Talbo, and they had all grown up together, she and the Talbo sisters, there on the old farm that has now become a railroad depot. Dolly she called Dollyheart, but Verena she called That One. She

sister she seemed someone who like myself Verena had adopted Pulled and guided by the gravity of Verena's planet we rotated separately in the outer spaces of the house

In the attic, a slipshod museum spookily peopled with old display dummies from Verena's dry goods store, there were many loose boards and by inching these I could look down into almost any room Dolly's room, unlike the rest of the house, which bulged with fat dour furniture, contained only a bed a bureau a chair a nun might have lived there except for one fact the walls everything was painted an outlandish pink, even the floor was this color Whenever I spied on Dolly, she usually was to be seen doing one of two things she was standing in front of a mirror snipping with a pair of garden shears her yellow and white already brief hair either that, or she was writing in pencil on a pad of coarse Kress paper She kept wetting the pencil on the tip of her tongue, and sometimes she spoke aloud a sentence as she put it down *Do not touch sweet foods like candy and salt will kill you for certain.* Now I'll tell you, she was writing letters But at first this correspondence was a puzzle to me. After all her only friend was Catherine Creek she saw no one else and she never left the house except once a week when she and Catherine went to River Woods where they gathered the ingredients of a dropsy remedy Dolly brewed and bottled Later I discovered she had customers for this medicine throughout the state, and it was to them that her many letters were addressed

Verena's room connecting with Dolly's by a passage, was rigged up like an office There was a rolltop desk, a library of ledgers filing cabinets After supper, wearing a green eyeshade, she would sit at her

desk totaling figures and turning the pages of her ledgers until even the streetlamps had gone out. Though on diplomatic, political terms with many people Verena had no close friends at all Men were afraid of her, and she herself seemed to be afraid of

and who finally married a liquor salesman from St. Louis Verena had been very bitter over this and said publicly that the man was no account. It was therefore a surprise when, as a wedding present, she gave the couple a honeymoon trip to the Grand Canyon Maudie and her husband never came back, they opened a filling station nearby Grand Canyon, and from time to time sent Verena Kodak snapshots of themselves These pictures were a pleasure and a grief There were nights when she never opened her ledgers, but sat with her forehead leaning in her hands

come a hurt rusty crying sound as though she'd tripped and fallen in the dark.

That part of the attic from which I could have looked down into the kitchen was fortified against me, for it was stacked with trunks like bales of cotton At that time it was the kitchen I most wanted to spy upon, this was the real living room of the house and Dolly spent most of the day there chatting with her friend Catherine Creek As a child, an orphan Catherine Creek had been hired out to Mr Uriah Talbo and they had all grown up together, she and the Talbo sisters, there on the old farm that has since become a railroad depot Dolly she called Dollyheart, but Verena she called That One She

sister, she seemed someone who, like myself Verena had adopted Pulled and guided by the gravity of Verena's planet, we rotated separately in the outer spaces of the house

In the attic, a slipshod museum spookily peopled with old display dummies from Verena's drygoods store, there were many loose boards, and by inching these I could look down into almost any room Dolly's room, unlike the rest of the house, which bulged with fat dour furniture, contained only a bed, a bureau, a chair. a nun might have lived there, except for one fact. the walls, everything was painted an outlandish pink, even the floor was this color. Whenever I spied on Dolly, she usually was to be seen doing one of two things she was standing in front of a mirror snipping with a pair of garden shears her yellow and white, already brief hair, either that, or she was writing in pencil on a pad of coarse Kress paper She kept wetting the pencil on the tip of her tongue, and sometimes she spoke aloud a sentence as she put it down *Do not touch sweet foods like candy and salt will kill you for certain* Now I'll tell you, she was writing letters But at first this correspondence was a puzzle to me After all, her only friend was Catherine Creek, she saw no one else and she never left the house, except once a week when she and Catherine went to River Woods where they gathered the ingredients of a dropsy remedy Dolly brewed and bottled Later I discovered she had customers for this medicine throughout the state, and it was to them that her many letters were addressed

Ver [illegible]
sage, [illegible]
desk, [illegible]
per, wearing a green eyeshade, she would sit at her

admitted, timidly, that I meant her no harm "You play games up here—in the attic? I told Verena you would be lonesome" Stooping, she rooted around in the depths of a barrel Here now," she said, "you can help me by looking in that other barrel I'm hunt-
[illegible] castle and a sack of pearl pebbles, all
[illegible]

a bowl of tropical fish—devils they were [illegible]
other up But I remember when we bought them; we went all the way to Brewton sixty miles I never went sixty miles before and I don't know that I ever will again Ah see, here it is, the castle" Soon after-
[illegible]

offering the sack [illegible]
piece of candy, even when it tastes like a pebble"

We were friends Dolly and Catherine and me I was eleven then I was sixteen Though no honors came my way those were the lovely years

I never brought anyone home with me, and I never wanted to Once I took a girl to the picture show, and on the way home she asked couldn't she come in for a drink of water If I'd thought she was really thirsty I would've said all right but I knew she was faking just so she could see inside the house the way people were always wanting to, and so I told her she better wait until she got home She said "All the world knows Dolly Talbo's gone, and you're gone too" I liked that girl well enough, but I gave her a shove anyway, and she said her brother would fix my wagon which he did right here at the corner of my mouth I've still got a scar where he hit me with a Coca Cola bottle

I know Dolly, they said, was Verena's cross, and

lived in the back yard in a tin roofed silvery little house set among sunflowers and trellises of butter-bean vine She claimed to be an Indian, which made most people wink, for she was dark as the angels of Africa But for all I know it may have been true certainly she dressed like an Indian That is, she had a string of turquoise beads, and wore enough rouge to put out your eyes, it shone on her cheeks like votive taillights Most of her teeth were gone, she kept her jaws jacked up with cotton wadding and Verena would say Dammit Catherine, since you can't make a sensible sound why in creation won't you go down to Doc Crocker and let him put some teeth in your head? It was true that she was hard to understand Dolly was the only one who could fluently translate her friends muffled, mumbling noises It was enough for Catherine that Dolly understood her they were always together and everything they had to say they said to each other bending my ear to an attic beam I could hear the tantalizing tremor of their voices flowing like sapsyrup through the old wood

To reach the attic, you climbed a ladder in the linen closet, the ceiling of which was a trapdoor One day, as I started up, I saw that the trapdoor was swung open and listening, heard above me an idle sweet humming, like the pretty sounds small girls make when they are playing alone I would have turned back, but the humming stopped, and a voice said "Catherine?'

"Collin," I answered, showing myself

The snowflake of Dolly's face held its shape, for once she did not dissolve "This is where you come—we wondered," she said, her voice frail and crinkling as tissue paper She had the eyes of a gifted person, kindled, transparent eyes, luminously green as mint jelly gazing at me through the attic twilight the

work Dolly was an ignorant as Catherine "America must have been called America before Columbus came It stands to reason Otherwise how would he have known it was America?" And Catherine said "That s correct America is an old Indian word" Of the two Catherine was the worst she insisted on her infallibility and if you did not write down exactly what she said she got jumpy and spilled the coffee or something But I never listened to her again after what she said about Lincoln that he was part

knows whether I would have grown to ordinary human size? At fourteen I was not much bigger than *Biddy Skinner* and people told how he d had offers from a circus Catherine said don t worry yourself honey all you need is a little stretching She pulled at my arms legs tugged at my head as though it were an apple latched to an unyielding bough. But it s the truth that within two years she d stretched me from four feet nine to five feet seven, and I can prove it by the breadknife knotches on the pantry door for even now when so much has gone when there is only wind in the stove and winter in the kitchen, those growing up scars are still there, a testimony

Despite the generally beneficial effect Dolly s medicine appeared to have on those who sent for it letters once in a while came saying Dear Miss Talbo we won t be needing any more dropsy cure on account poor Cousin Belle (or whoever) passed away

said, too, that more went on in the house on Talbo Lane than a body cared to think about Maybe so But those were the lovely years

On winter afternoons, as soon as I came in from school, Catherine hustled open a jar of preserves, while Dolly put a foot-high pot of coffee on the stove and pushed a pan of biscuits into the oven, and the oven, opening would let out a hot vanilla fragrance, for Dolly, who lived off sweet foods, was always baking a pound cake, raisin bread, some kind of cookie or fudge never would touch a vegetable, and the only meat she liked was the chicken brain, a pea sized thing gone before you've tasted it What with a woodstove and an open fireplace, the kitchen was warm as a cow's tongue The nearest winter came was to frost the windows with its zero blue breath If some wizard would like to make me a present, let him give me a bottle filled with the voices of that kitchen, the ha ha ha and fire whispering, a bottle brimming with its buttery sugary bakery smells—though Catherine smelled like a sow in the spring It looked more like a cozy parlor than a kitchen, there was a hook rug on the floor, rocking chairs, ranged along the walls were pictures of kittens, an enthusiasm of Dolly's, there was a geranium plant that bloomed, then bloomed again all year round, and Catherine's goldfish, in a bowl on the oilcloth-covered table, fanned their tails through the portals of the coral castle Sometimes we worked jigsaw puzzles, dividing the pieces among us, and Catherine would hide pieces if she thought you were going to finish your part of the puzzle before she finished hers Or they would help with my homework, that was a mess About all natural things Dolly was sophisticated, she had the subterranean intelligence of a bee that knows where to find the sweetest flower she

could tell you of a storm a day in advance, predict the fruit of the fig tree, lead you to mushrooms and wild honey, a hidden nest of guinea hen eggs. She looked around her and felt what she saw. But about homework Dolly was an ignorant as Catherine. "America must have been called America before Columbus came. It stands to reason. Otherwise how would he have known it was America?" And Catherine said "That's correct. America is an old Indian word." Of the two Catherine was the worst: she insisted on her infallibility and if you did not write down exactly what she said, she got jumpy and spilled the coffee or something. But I never listened to her again after what she said about Lincoln: that he was part Negro and part Indian and only a speck white. Even I knew this was not true. But I am under special obligation to Catherine: if it had not been for her who knows whether I would have grown to ordinary human size? At fourteen I was not much bigger than Buddy Skinner, and people told how he'd had offers from a circus. Catherine said don't worry yourself honey, all you need is a little stretching. She pulled at my arms, legs, tugged at my head as though it were an apple latched to an unyielding bough. But it's the truth that within two years she'd stretched me from four feet nine to five feet seven, and I can prove it by the breadknife knotches on the pantry door: for even now, when so much has gone, when there is only wind in the stove and winter in the kitchen, those growing up scars are still there, a testimony.

Despite the generally beneficial effect Dolly's medicine appeared to have on those who sent for it, letters once in a while came saying Dear Miss Talbo we won't be needing any more dropsy cure on account of poor Cousin Belle (or whoever) passed away

said, too, that more went on in the house on Talbo Lane than a body cared to think about Maybe so But those were the lovely years

On winter afternoons, as soon as I came in from school, Catherine hustled open a jar of preserves, while Dolly put a foot-high pot of coffee on the stove and pushed a pan of biscuits into the oven, and the oven, opening, would let out a hot vanilla fragrance, for Dolly, who lived off sweet foods, was always bak ing a pound cake, raisin bread, some kind of cookie or fudge never would touch a vegetable, and the only meat she liked was the chicken brain, a pea sized thing gone before you've tasted it What with a woodstove and an open fireplace, the kitchen was warm as a cow's tongue The nearest winter came was to frost the windows with its zero blue breath If some wizard would like to make me a present, let him give me a bottle filled with the voices of that kitchen, the ha ha ha and fire whispering, a bottle brimming with its buttery sugary bakery smells—though Catherine smelled like a sow in the spring It looked more like a cozy parlor than a kitchen, there was a hook rug on the floor, rocking chairs, ranged along the walls were pictures of kittens, an enthusiasm of Dolly's, there was a geranium plant that bloomed, then bloomed again all year round, and Catherine's goldfish, in a bowl on the oilcloth covered table, fanned their tails through the portals of the coral castle Sometimes we worked jigsaw puzzles, dividing the pieces among us, and Catherine would hide pieces if she thought you were going to finish your part of the puzzle before she finished hers Or they would help with my homework, that was a mess About all natural things Dolly was sophisticated, she had the subterranean intelligence of a bee that knows where to find the sweetest flower she

The boys who built it, provided they are still alive, must by now be very old men certainly the tree-house was fifteen or twenty years old when Dolly first found it and that was a quarter of a century before she showed it to me To reach it was easy as climbing stairs there were footholds of gnarled bark and tough vines to grip even Catherine who was heavy around the hips and complained of rheumatism had no trouble But Catherine felt no love for the tree-house she did not know as Dolly knew and made me know that it was a ship that to sit up there was to sail along the cloudy coastline of every dream Mark my word said Catherine them boards are too old, them nails are slippery as worms gonna crack in two gonna fall and bust our heads don t I know it

Storing our provisions in the tree house we separated into the woods each carrying a grain sack to be filled with herbs leaves strange roots No one not even Catherine knew altogether what went into the med cine for it was a secret Dolly kept to her

witched prince This was her story "Once back yonder when we were children (Verena still with her baby teeth and Catherine no higher than a fence post) there were gipsies thick as birds in a blackberry patch —not l ke now when maybe you see a few straggling through each year They came with spring sudden like the dogwood pink, there they were—up and down the road and in the woods around But our men hated the sight of them and daddy that was your great uncle Uriah said he would shoot any he caught on our place And so I never told when I saw the g ps es taking water from the creek or steal ng old winter pecans off the ground. Then one evening, it

last week bless her soul Then the kitchen was a mournful place, with folded hands and nodding heads my two friends bleakly recalled the circumstances of the case, and Well, Catherine would say, we did the best we could Dollyheart, but the good Lord had other notions Verena, too, could make the kitchen sad, as she was always introducing a new rule or enforcing an old one do, don't, stop, start it was as though we were clocks she kept an eye on to see that our time jibed with her own, and woe if we were ten minutes fast, an hour slow Verena went off like a cuckoo That One! said Catherine, and Dolly would go hush now! hush now! as though to quiet not Catherine but a mutinous inner whispering Verena in her heart wanted, I think, to come into the kitchen and be a part of it, but she was too like a lone man in a house full of women and children, and the only way she could make contact with us was through assertive outbursts Dolly, get rid of that kitten, you want to aggravate my asthma? who left the water running in the bathroom? which one of you broke my umbrella? Her ugly moods sifted through the house like a sour yellow mist That One Hush now, hush

Once a week, Saturdays mostly, we went to River Woods For these trips, which lasted the whole day, Catherine fried a chicken and deviled a dozen eggs, and Dolly took along a chocolate layer cake and a supply of divinity fudge Thus armed, and carrying three empty grain sacks, we walked out the church road past the cemetery and through the field of Indian grass Just entering the woods there was a double-trunked China tree, *really two trees, but* their branches were so embraced that you could step from one into the other, in fact, they were bridged by a tree house spacious, sturdy, a model of a tree-house, it was like a raft floating in the sea of leaves

The boys who built it, provided they are still alive, must by now be very old men certainly the tree-house was fifteen or twenty years old when Dolly first found it and that was a quarter of a century before she showed it to me To reach it was easy as climbing stairs there were footholds of gnarled bark and tough vines to grip even Catherine who was heavy around the hips and complained of rheumatism had no trouble But Catherine felt no love for the tree-house she did not know as Dolly knew and made me know that it was a ship that to sit up there was to sail along the cloudy coastline of every dream Mark my word said Catherine them boards are too old, them nails are slippery as worms gonna crack in two, gonna fall and bust our heads don t I know it

Storing our provisions in the tree house we separated into the woods each carrying a grain sack to be filled with herbs leaves strange roots No one, not even Catherine knew altogether what went into the medicine for it was a secret Dolly kept to herself and we

ings in her

inside she

witched prince This was her story "Once back

—like now when maybe you see a few straggling through each year They came with spring sudden like the dogwood pink, there they were—up and down the road and in the woods around But our men hated the sight of them and daddy that was your great uncle Uriah said he would shoot any he caught on our place And so I never told when I saw the gipsies taking water from the creek or stealing old winter pecans off the ground Then one evening it

was April and falling rain, I went out to the cowshed where Fairybell had a new little calf; and there in the cowshed were three gipsy women, two of them old and one of them young, and the young one was lying naked and twisting on the cornshucks. When they saw that I was not afraid, that I was not going to run and tell, one of the old women asked would I bring a light. So I went to the house for a candle, and when I came back the woman who had sent me was holding a red hollering baby upside down by its feet, and the other woman was milking Fairybell. I helped them wash the baby in the warm milk and wrap it in a scarf. Then one of the old women took my hand and said: Now I am going to give you a gift by teaching you a rhyme. It was a rhyme about evergreen bark, dragonfly fern—and all the other things we come here in the woods to find: *Boil till dark and pure if you want a dropsy cure.* In the morning they were gone; I looked for them in the fields and on the road; there was nothing left of them but the rhyme in my head."

Calling to each other, hooting like owls loose in the daytime, we worked all morning in opposite parts of the woods. Towards afternoon, our sacks fat with skinned bark, tender, torn roots, we climbed back into the green web of the China tree and spread the food. There was good creek water in a mason jar, or if the weather was cold a thermos of hot coffee, and we wadded leaves to wipe our chicken-stained, fudge-sticky fingers. Afterwards, telling fortunes with flowers, speaking of sleepy things, it was as though we floated through the afternoon on the raft in the tree; we belonged there, as the sun-silvered leaves belonged, the dwelling whippoorwills.

About once a year I go over to the house on Talbo

Lane and walk around in the yard I was there the other day and came across an old iron tub lying over turned in the weeds like a black fallen meteor Dolly —Dolly hovering over the tub dropping our grain-sack gatherings into boiling water and stirring stirring with a sawed off broomstick the brown as tobacco spit brew She did the mixing of the medicine alone while Catherine and I stood watching like apprentices to a witch We all helped later with the bottling of it and, because it produced a fume that exploded ordinary corks my particular job was to roll stoppers of toilet paper Sales averaged around six bottles a week, at two dollars a bottle The money Dolly said, belonged to the three of us and we spent it fast as it came in We were always sending away for stuff advertised in magazines Take Up Woodcarving, Parcheesi the game for young and old, Anyone Can Play A Bazooka Once we sent away for a book of French lessons it was my idea that if we got to talk French we would have a secret language that Verena or nobody would understand Dolly was willing to try but "Passez moi a spoon" was the best she ever did and after learning "Je suis fatigué" Catherine never opened the book again she said that was all she needed to know

Verena often remarked that there would be trouble if anyone ever got poisoned but otherwise she did not show much interest in the dropsy cure Then one year we totaled up and found we'd earned enough to have to pay an income tax Whereupon Verena began asking questions money was like a wildcat whose trail she stalked with a trained hunter's muffled step and an eye for every broken twig What she wanted to know went into the medicine? and Dolly flattered almost giggling nonetheless waved her hands and said Well this and that, nothing special.

was April and falling rain, I went out to the cow-shed where Fairybell had a new little calf, and there in the cowshed were three gipsy women, two of them old and one of them young, and the young one was lying naked and twisting on the cornshucks When they saw that I was not afraid, that I was not going to run and tell, one of the old women asked would I bring a light So I went to the house for a candle, and when I came back the woman who had sent me was holding a red hollering baby upside down by its feet, and the other woman was milking Fairybell. I helped them wash the baby in the warm milk and wrap it in a scarf Then one of the old women took my hand and said Now I am going to give you a gift by teaching you a rhyme It was a rhyme about evergreen bark, dragonfly fern—and all the other things we come here in the woods to find *Boil till dark and pure if you want a dropsy cure* In the morning they were gone, I looked for them in the fields and on the road, there was nothing left of them but the rhyme in my head"

Calling to each other hooting like owls loose in the daytime we worked all morning in opposite parts of the woods Towards afternoon, our sacks fat with skinned bark, tender torn roots, we climbed back into the green web of the China tree and spread the food There was good creek water in a mason jar, or if the weather was cold a thermos of hot coffee, and we wadded leaves to wipe our chicken-stained, fudge-sticky fingers Afterwards, telling fortunes with flowers, speaking of sleepy things, it was as though we floated through the afternoon on the raft in the tree, we belonged there, as the sun-silvered leaves belonged, the dwelling whippoorwills

About once a year I go over to the house on Talbo

dows and sagging doors. For a generation no one had been near it except schoolkids who went there to

as Dr. Morris Ritz was coming to Sunday dinner.

During the years that I lived there, Dr Morris Ritz was the only person ever invited to dine at the house on Talbo Lane So for many reasons it was an occasion Catherine and Dolly did a spring cleaning: they beat rugs, brought china from the attic, had every room smelling of floorwax and lemon polish. There was to be fried chicken and ham, English peas, sweet potatoes rolls banana pudding two kinds of cake and tuttifrutti ice cream from the drugstore. Sunday noon Verena came in to look at the table: with its sprawling centerpiece of peach colored roses and dense fancy stretches of silverware, it seemed set for a party of twenty, actually, there were only two places

Dolly seei

Collin wa

going to stay in the kitchen with Catherine Verena put her foot down "Don t fool with me, Dolly This is important

you And

up your h

Dolly was scared to death she hid in her room, and long after our guest had arrived I had to be sent to fe

ops and her jaws jammed with more

Verena seemed to let the matter die, yet very often, sitting at the supper table, her eyes paused ponderingly on Dolly, and once, when we were gathered in the yard around the boiling tub, I looked up and saw Verena in a window watching us with uninterrupted fixity: by then, I suppose, her plan had taken shape, but she did not make her first move until summer.

Twice a year, in January and again in August, Verena went on buying trips to St. Louis or Chicago. That summer, the summer I reached sixteen, she went to Chicago and after two weeks returned accompanied by a man called Dr. Morris Ritz. Naturally everyone wondered: who was Dr. Morris Ritz? He wore bow ties and sharp jazzy suits; his lips were blue and he had gaudy small swerving eyes: altogether he looked like a mean mouse. We heard that he lived in the best room at the Lola Hotel and ate steak dinners at Phil's Café. On the streets he strutted along bobbing his shiny head at every passerby; he made no friends, however, and was not seen in the company of anyone except Verena, who never brought him to the house and never mentioned his name until one day Catherine had the gall to say, "Miss Verena, just who is this funny looking little Dr. Morris Ritz?" and Verena, getting white around the mouth, replied: "Well, now, he's not half so funny looking as some I could name."

Scandalous people said the way Verena was carrying on with that little Jew from Chicago, and him twenty years younger. The story that got around was that they were up to something out in the old canning factory the other side of town. As it developed they were, but not what the gang at the poolhall thought. Most any afternoon you could see Verena and Dr. Morris Ritz walking out toward the canning factory, an abandoned blasted brick ruin with jagged win-

dows and sagging doors. For a generation no one had been near it except schoolkids who went there to [illegible]

as Dr. Morris Ritz was coming to Sunday dinner.

During the years that I lived there, Dr. Morris Ritz was the only person ever invited to dine at the house on Talbo Lane. So for many reasons it was an occasion. Catherine and Dolly did a spring cleaning: they beat rugs, brought china from the attic, had every room smelling of floorwax and lemon polish. There was to be [illegible]

Sunday noon Verena came in to look at the table: with its sprawling centerpiece of peach-colored roses and dense fancy stretches of silverware, it seemed set for a party of twenty; actually, there were only two places. Verena went ahead and set two more, and Dolly, seeing this, said weakly Well, it was all right if Collin wanted to eat at the table, but that she was going to stay in the kitchen with Catherine. Verena put her foot down. "Don't fool with me, Dolly. This [illegible]

[illegible] was scared to death: she hid in her room, and long after our guest had arrived I had to be sent to fetch her. She was lying in the pink bed with a wet washrag on her forehead, and Catherine was sitting beside her. Catherine was all slecked up, rouge on her cheeks like lollipops and her jaws jammed with more

cotton than ever, she said, "Honey, you ought to get up from there—you're going to ruin that pretty dress." It was a calico dress Verena had brought from Chicago, Dolly sat up and smoothed it, then immediately lay down again "If Verena knew how sorry I am," she said helplessly, and so I went and told Verena that Dolly was sick Verena said she'd see about that, and marched off leaving me alone in the hall with Dr Morris Ritz

Oh he was a hateful thing "So you're sixteen," he [illegible]

keeping time to some vaudeville tune he might have been a tapdancer or a sodajerk, except that he was carrying a brief case, which suggested a more serious occupation I wondered what kind of doctor he was supposed to be, indeed, was on the point of asking when Verena returned steering Dolly by the elbow.

The shadows of the hall, the tapestried furniture [illegible]

Talbo, am I honored to meet you!" he said, and cranked his bow tie

We sat down to dinner and Catherine came around with the chicken She served Verena, then Dolly, and when the doctor's turn came he said, "Tell you the truth, the only piece of chicken I care about is the brain· don't suppose you d have that back in the kitchen, mammy?"

Catherine looked so far down her nose she got almost cross-eyed, and with her tongue all mixed up in

the cotton wadding she told him that, "Dolly's took those brains on her plate"

"These southern accents, Jesus," he said, genuinely dismayed.

"She says I have the brains on my plate," said Dolly, her cheeks red as Catherine's rouge "But please let me pass them to you"

"If you're sure you don't mind "

"She doesn't mind a bit" said Verena "She only eats sweet things anyway Here, Dolly have some banana pudding"

Presently Dr Ritz commenced a fit of sneezing "The flowers those roses old allergy "

"Oh dear," said Dolly who seeing an opportunity to escape into the kitchen seized the bowl of roses it slipped, crystal crashed roses landed in gravy and gravy landed on us all "You see" she said speaking to herself and with tears teetering in her eyes, "you see, it's hopeless"

"Nothing is hopeless Dolly sit down and finish your pudding," Verena advised in a substantial chin up voice "Besides we have a nice little surprise for you. Morris show Dolly those lovely labels"

Murmuring "No harm done" Dr Ritz stopped rubbing gravy spotches off his sleeve and went into the hall, returning with his brief case His fingers buzzed through a sheaf of papers then lighted on a large envelope which he passed down to Dolly

There were gum stickers in the envelope, triangular [illegible] lettering Gipsy Queen Dropsy [illegible] han- [illegible] Dr Ritz. "Made in Chicago" [illegible] the picture real artist that guy" Dolly shuffled the labels with a puzzled apprehensive expression until Verena asked "Aren't you pleased?"

gan fighting into That One But it was as though the rebellious inner whispering had become a raucous voice, an opponent she must outshout Hush now! hush now! until Catherine had to put her arms around Dolly and say hush, too

We got out a deck of Rook cards and spread them on the bed Not well Cath [illegible]

[illegible] you"

Catherine wanted to follow me up the ladder into the attic, except she had on her fine clothes So I went alone There was a good knothole that looked straight down into the pink room but Verena was standing directly under it, and all I could see was her hat, for she was still wearing the hat she'd put on when she left the house It was a straw skimmer decorated with a [illegible]

[illegible] shadow as she moved from one part of the room to another "You are my own flesh, and I love you tenderly in my heart I love you I could prove it now by giving you the only *thing* that has ever been mine then you would have it all. Please, Ve-

The labels twitched in Dolly's hands "I'm not sure I understand "

"Of course you do," said Verena smiling thinly "It's obvious enough I told Morris that old story of yours and he thought of this wonderful name "

"Gipsy Queen Dropsy Cure very catchy, that," said the doctor "Look great in ads "

"*My* medicine?" said Dolly, her eyes still lowered "But I don't need any labels, Verena I write my own "

Dr Ritz snapped his fingers "Say, that's good! We can have labels printed like her own handwriting personal, see?"

"We've spent enough money already," Verena told him briskly, and, turning to Dolly, said "Morris and I are going up to Washington this week to get a copyright on these labels and register a patent for the medicine—naming you as the inventor, naturally Now the point is, Dolly, you must sit down and write out a complete formula for us "

Dolly's face loosened, and the labels scattered on the floor, skimmed Leaning her hands on the table she pushed herself upward, slowly her features came together again, she lifted her head and looked blinkingly at Dr Ritz, at Verena It won't do," she said quietly She moved to the door put a hand on its handle "It won't do because you haven't any right, Verena Nor you, sir "

I helped Catherine clear the table the ruined roses, the uncut cakes, the vegetables no one had touched [illegible]

room

Hush now! hush now! she said when Catherine be-

gan lighting into That One But it was as though the rebellious inner whispering had become a raucous voice an opponent she must outshout Hush now! hush now! until Catherine had to put her arms around Dolly and say hush, too

We got out a deck of Rook cards and spread them on

we told fortunes instead Sometime around dusk Verena came home We heard her footsteps in the hall,

cuse you"

Catherine wanted to follow me up the ladder into the attic

and all I could see was her hat, for she was still wearing the hat she'd put on when she left the house It was a straw skimmer decorated with a cluster of celluloid fruit "Those are facts" she was saying and the fruit shivered shimmered in the blue dimness "Two thousand for the old factory Bill Tatum and four carpenters working out there at eighty cents an hour seven thousand dollars worth of machinery already ordered not to mention what a specialist like

love you tenderly in my heart I love you I could prove it now by giving you the only thing that has ever been mine then you would have it all. Please, Ve-

The labels twitched in Dolly's hands "I'm not sure I understand"

"Of course you do," said Verena, smiling thinly "It's obvious enough I told Morris that old story of yours and he thought of this wonderful name"

"Gipsy Queen Dropsy Cure very catchy, that," said the doctor "Look great in ads"

"*My* medicine?" said Dolly, her eyes still lowered "But I don't need any labels, Verena I write my own"

Dr Ritz snapped his fingers "Say, that's good! We can have labels printed like her own handwriting. personal, see?"

"We've spent enough money already," Verena told him briskly, and, turning to Dolly said 'Morris and I are going up to Washington this week to get a copyright on these labels and register a patent for the medicine—naming you as the inventor naturally Now the point is Dolly you must sit down and write out a complete formula for us"

Dolly's face loosened, and the labels scattered on the floor, skimmed Leaning her hands on the table she pushed herself upward, slowly her features came together again, she lifted her head and looked blinkingly at Dr Ritz, at Verena "It won't do," she said quietly She moved to the door put a hand on its handle 'It won't do because you haven't any right, Verena Nor you, sir"

I helped Catherine clear the table the ruined [illegible], the uncut cakes, the veget[illegible]
Verena [illegible]
the [illegible]
ward [illegible] their heads Then we sliced the devil's-food cake and took it into Dolly's room

Hush now! hush now! sh[illegible]

gan lighting into That One. But it was as though the rebellious inner whispering had become a raucous voice, an opponent she must outshout: Hush now! hush now! until Catherine had to put her arms around Dolly and say hush, too

We got out a deck of Rook cards and spread them on the bed. Naturally Catherine had to go and remember it was Sunday, she said maybe we could risk another black mark in the Judgment Book, but there were too many beside her name already After thinking it over,

cuse you"

Catherine wanted to follow me up the ladder into the attic, except she had on her fine clothes So I went alone There was a good knothole that looked straight down into the pink room, but Verena was standing directly under it, and all I could see was her hat, for she was still wearing the hat she'd put on when she left the house It was a straw skimmer decorated with a cluster of celluloid fruit "Those are facts," she was saying, and the fruit shivered, shimmered in the blue dimness "Two thousand for the old factory, Bill Tatum

Morris Ritz is costing And why? All for you!"

The labels twitched in Dolly's hands "I'm not sure I understand"

"Of course you do," said Verena, smiling thinly. "It's [illegible] story of yours [illegible]

[illegible] chy, that," said the doctor. "Look great in ads"

"*My* medicine?" said Dolly, her eyes still lowered. "But I don't need any labels, Verena I write my own"

Dr Ritz snapped his fingers "Say, that's good! We can have labels printed like her own handwriting, personal, see?"

"We've spent enough money already," Verena told him briskly, and, turning to Dolly, said "Morris and I are going up to Washington this week to get a copyright on these labels and register a patent for the medicine—naming you as the inventor naturally Now the point is, Dolly, you must sit down and write out a complete formula for us"

Dolly's face loosened, and the labels scattered on the floor, skimmed Leaning her hands on the table she pushed herself upward, slowly her features came together again, she lifted her head and looked blinkingly at Dr Ritz, at Verena "It won't do," she said quietly She moved to the door, put a hand on its handle. "It won't do because you haven't any right, Verena. Nor you, sir."

I helped Catherine clear the table the ruined roses, the uncut cakes, the vegetables no one had touched. [illegible]

room

Hush now! hush now! she said when Catherine be-

gan lighting into That One But it was as though the rebellious inner whispering had become a raucous voice, an opponent she must outshout. Hush now! hush now! until Catherine had to put her arms around Dolly and say hush, too

We got out a deck of Rook cards and spread them on the bed Naturally Catherine had to go and remember it was Sunday, she said maybe we could risk another

rena came home We heard her footsteps in the hall,

cuse you."

Catherine wanted to follow me up the ladder into

rectly under it, and all I could see was her hat, for she was still wearing the hat she'd put on when she left the house It was a straw skimmer decorated with a cluster of celluloid fruit "Those are facts," she was saying, and the fruit shivered, shimmered in the blue dimness "Two thousand for the old factory, Bill Tatum and four carpenters working out there at eighty cents an hour, seven thousand dollars worth of machinery already ordered, not to mention what a specialist like Morris Ritz is costing And why? All for you!"

"All for me?" and Dolly sounded sad and failing as the dusk. I saw her shadow as she moved from one part of the room to another "You are my own flesh, and I love you tenderly, in my heart I love you I could prove it now by giving you the only thing that has ever been mine then you would have it all. Please, Ve-

rattling this little yellow drum, and singing. Dolly said

voices then sends them talking and telling through the leaves and the fields—I've heard Papa clear as day.

On such a night, now that it was September, the

I lay falling asleep.

Then I thought Dolly at last had come to kiss me goodnight, for I woke up sensing her near me in the room, but it was almost morning, beginning light was like a flowering foliage at the windows, and roosters ranted in distant yards. "Shhh, Collin," Dolly whispered, bending over me. She was wearing a woolen winter suit and a hat with a traveling veil that misted her face. "I only wanted you to know where we are going."

"To the tree house?" I said, and thought I was talking in my sleep.

Dolly nodded. "Just for now. Until we know better what our plans will be." She could see that I was

The town clock was tolling; she seemed to be waiting for it to

was nothing for Dolly to say except: "Don't forget your comb."

rena," she said, faltering, 'let this one thing belong to me"

Verena switched on a light "You speak of giving," and her voice was hard as the sudden bitter glare 'All these years that I've worked like a fieldhand what *haven't I given you? This house, that* ."

"You've given everything to me," Dolly interrupted softly "And to Catherine and to Collin Except, we've earned our way a bit we've kept a nice home for you, haven't we?"

"Oh a fine home," said Verena whipping off her hat Her face was full of blood "You and that gurgling fool *Has it not struck you that I never ask anyone into this house? And for a very simple reason I'm ashamed* to *Look what happened today*"

I could hear the breath go out of Dolly 'I'm sorry," she said faintly "I am truly I'd always thought there was a place for us here, that you needed us somehow But it's going to be all right now, Verena We'll go away"

Verena sighed "Poor Dolly Poor poor thing Wherever would you go?

The answer a little while in coming was fragile as the flight of a moth I know a place

Later, I waited in bed for Dolly to come and kiss me goodnight. My room, beyond the parlor in a faraway corner of the house was the room where their father, Mr Uriah Talbo, had lived In his mad old age, Verena had brought him here from the farm, and here he'd died, not knowing where he was Though dead ten, fifteen years, the pee and tobacco old man smell of him still saturated the mattress, the closet and [illegible] *shelf in the closet* [illegible]
away with him fro[illegible]
a lad my own age [illegible] *in a Dixie regiment*

rattling this little yellow drum, and singing. Dolly said that when she was a girl she'd liked to wake up winter [illegible]

[illegible]

room, but it was almost morning, beginning light was like a flowering foliage at the windows, and roosters ranted in distant yards "Shhh, Collin," Dolly whispered bending over me She was wearing a woolen winter suit and a hat with a traveling veil that misted her face I only wanted you to know where we are going"

"To the tree house?" I said, and thought I was talking in my sleep

Dolly nodded "Just for now Until we know better what our plans will be" She could see that I wa[illegible]

[illegible]

The town clock [illegible]

rena," she said, faltering, "let this one thing belong to me"

Verena switched on a light "You speak of giving," and her voice was hard as the sudden bitter glare "All these years that I've worked like a fieldhand what haven't I given you? This house, that "

"You've given everything to me,' Dolly interrupted softly "And to Catherine and to Collin Except, we've earned our way a bit we've kept a nice home for you, haven't we?'

"Oh a fine home," said Verena whipping off her hat Her face was full of blood "You and that gurgling fool Has it not struck you that I never ask anyone into this house? And for a very simple reason I'm ashamed to Look what happened today"

I could hear the breath go out of Dolly "I'm sorry," she said faintly "I am truly I'd always thought there was a place for us here that you needed us somehow But it's going to be all right now, Verena We'll go away'

Verena sighed "Poor Dolly Poor poor thing Wherever would you go?'

The answer a little while in coming was fragile as the flight of a moth "I know a place

Later I waited in bed for Dolly to come and kiss me goodnight. My room beyond the parlor in a faraway corner of the house was the room where their father, Mr Uriah Talbo had lived In his mad old age, Verena had brought him here from the farm and here he'd died, not knowing where he was Though dead ten, fifteen years, the pee and tobacco old man smell of him still saturated the mattress the closet, and on a shelf in the closet was the one possession he'd carried away with him from the farm a small yellow drum as a lad my own age he'd marched in a Dixie regiment

[illegible] listening Dolly said

[illegible]

oices, then sends them talking and telling through the eaves and the fields—I've heard Papa clear as day.

On such a night, now that it was September, the [illegible]

[illegible] lay falling asleep

Then I thought Dolly at last had come to kiss me goodnight for I woke up sensing her near me in the room but it was almost morning, beginning light was like a flowering foliage at the windows, and roosters ranted in distant yards "Shhh, Collin," Dolly whispered, bending over me She was wearing a woolen winter suit and a hat with a traveling veil that misted her face I only wanted you to know where we are going"

"To the tree house?" I said, and thought I was talking in my sleep

Dolly nodded Just for now Until we know better what our plans will be" She could see that I was frightened, and put her hand on my forehead.

"You and Catherine but not me?" and I was jerking with a chill You can't leave without me"

The town clock was tolling she seemed to be waiting for it to finish before making up her mind. It struck five, and by the time the note had died away I had climbed out of bed and rushed into my clothes There was nothing for Dolly to say except. "Don't forget your comb"

Two

IF IT HADN'T BEEN for Riley Henderson I doubt anyone would have known or at least known so soon, that we were in the tree

Catherine had loaded her oilcloth satchel with the leftovers from Sunday dinner and we were enjoying a breakfast of cake and chicken when gunfire slapped through the woods We sat there with cake going dry in our mouths Below a sleek bird dog cantered into view, followed by Riley Henderson he was shoulder-

nage herself among the leaves

He paused not far away and his wary, tanned

who shouted "Riley Henderson, don't you dare shoot us!"

... Hello Miss Talbo What are you folks doing up there? Wildcat chase you?"

"Just sitting said Dolly promptly as though she were afraid for either Catherine or I to answer "That's a fine mess of squirrels you've got"

"Take a couple" he said detaching two "We had

Catherine met us in the yard; she was crooked over with the weight of a brimming oilcloth satchel; her eyes were swollen, she had been crying, and Dolly, oddly calm and certain of what she was doing, said it doesn't matter, Catherine—we can send for your goldfish once we find a place. Verena's closed quiet windows loomed above us; we moved cautiously past them and silently out the gate. A fox terrier barked at us, but there was no one on the street, and no one saw us pass through the town except a sleepless prisoner gazing from the jail. We reached the field of Indian grass at the same moment as the sun. Dolly's veil [illegible] around us the leaves shook down their dew.

Two

IF IT HADN'T BEEN for Riley Henderson, I doubt anyone would have known or at least known so soon, that we were in the tree

Catherine had loaded her oilcloth satchel with the

in our mouths Below, a sleek bird dog cantered into view, followed by Riley Henderson, he was shoulder-

He paused not far away, and his wary, tanned young face
he took a ro
sent itself
who shouted "Riley Henderson don't you dare shoot us!"

"... hello Miss Talbo What are you folks doing up there? Wildcat chase you?"

"Just sitting" said Dolly promptly as though she were afraid for either Catherine or I to answer "That's a fine mess of squirrels you've got"

"... ," he said, detaching two "We had

Catherme met us in the yard, she was crooked over with the weight of a brimming oilcloth satchel, her eyes were swollen, she had been crying, and Dolly, oddly calm and certain of what she was doing said it doesn t matter, Catherine—we can send for your goldfish once we find a place Verena s closed quiet windows loomed above us, we moved cautiously past them and silently out the gate A fox terrier barked at us, but there was no one on the street, and no one saw us pass through the town except a sleepless prisoner gazing from the jail We reached the field of Indian grass at the same moment as the sun Dolly's veil flared in the morning breeze, and a pair of pheasants, nesting in our path, swept before us, their metal wings swiping the cockscomb scarlet grass The China tree was a September bowl of green and greenish gold Gonna fall, gonna bust our heads Catherine said, as all around us the leaves shook down their dew

bytenan minister spoke to her about it she told him she hated her children and wished they were dead And

door down with a hatchet, which seems a tall order for a boy of nine or ten whatever he was Afterwards Rose was sent off to a place on the Gulf Coast, an institution and she may still be living there at least I've never heard that she died Now Riley and his uncle Horace Holton couldn't get on One night he stole Horace's Oldsmobile and drove out to the Dance N Dine with Mamie Curtiss she was fast as lightning and maybe five years older than Riley who was not more than fifteen at the time Well Horace heard they were at the Dance N Dine and got the sheriff to drive him out there he said he was going to teach Riley a

longed to Rose and that was meant for him and his sisters He offered to fight

of Romance he had a job marrying couples on an excursion steamer that made moonlight cruises up the Mississippi From then on Riley was his own boss

ved against the inheritance he was

"You are welcome any morning," said Dolly, raising her veil "I daresay we will be here for some while" ... is invitation but

said "Catherine Creek, you've never touched tobacco in your life" Catherine allowed as to how she may have been missing something It must be a comfort, so many folks speak in its favor, and Dolly heart, when

thought it was hat I was a nor- me, though he seemed to be for he moved with the drawn-out cow-

whether she does any more but she used to have a pipe and a can of Prince Albert with half an apple cut up in it But you musn't tell that" she added, suddenly aware of Riley who laughed aloud

Usually glimpsed on the street or seen passing in his car Riley wore a tense trigger tempered expression, but there in the China tree he seemed relaxed frequent smiles enriched his whole face, as though he wanted at least to be friendly, if not friends Dolly, for

"You are welcome any morning," said Dolly, raising her veil "I daresay we will be here for some while." … invitation but …

said "Catherine Creek, you've never touched tobacco in your life" Catherine allowed as to how she may have been missing something "It must be a comfort, so many folks speak in its favor, and Dollyheart, when you get to be our age you've got to look for comforts." Dolly bit her lip, "Well, I don't suppose there's any har…

co…

lavatory at school) and I'd given up *one of them*, cigarettes, two years before not because I thought it … I thought it was … y that I was a not- … n me, though he seemed to be for he moved with the drawn-out cow- …

sick, and Catherine said next time she would like to try a pipe, as they smelled so good Whereupon Dolly volunteered the surprising fact that Verena smoked a pipe, something I'd never known "I don't know whether she does any more, but she used to have a pipe and a can of Prince Albert with half an apple cut up in it But you mustn't tell that," she added, suddenly aware of Riley, who laughed aloud

Usually, glimpsed on the street or seen passing in his car Riley wore a tense, trigger tempered expression; but there in the China tree he seemed relaxed frequent smiles enriched his whole face, as though he wanted at least to be friendly, if not friends. Dolly, for

white, aged 60, yellow grayish hair, thin, height 5 feet 3, green eyes, probably insane but not likely to be dangerous, post description bakeries as she is cake eater. Catherine Creek, Negro, pretends to be Indian, age about 60, toothless, confused speech, short and heavy, strong, likely to be dangerous. Collin Talbo Fenwick, white, age 16, looks younger, height 5 feet 7, blond, gray eyes, thin, bad posture, scar at corner of mouth, surly natured All three wanted as runaways They sure haven't run far, Riley said in the post office, and postmistress Mrs. Peters rushed to the telephone to say Riley Henderson had seen us in the woods below the cemetery.

While this was happening we were peaceably setting about to make the tree-house cozy From Catherine's satchel we took a rose and gold scrapquilt, and [illegible]

Later, we all went to the creek and bathed our feet and faces in the cold water There are as many creeks in River Woods as there are veins in a leaf clear, crackling, they crook their way down into the little [illegible]

her part, appeared to be at ease and enjoying his company. Certainly she was not afraid of him: perhaps it was because we were in the tree-house, and the tree-house was her own.

"Thank you for the squirrels, *sir*," she said, as he prepared to leave. "And don't forget to come again."

He swung himself to the ground. "Want a ride? My car's up by the cemetery."

Dolly told him. "That's kind of you, but really we haven't any place to go."

Grinning, he lifted his gun and aimed it at us; and Catherine yelled You ought to be whipped, boy; but he laughed and waved and ran, his bird dog barking, booming ahead Dolly said gaily, "Let's have a cigarette," for the package had been left behind.

By the time Riley reached town the news was roaring in the air like a flight of bees how we'd *run* off in the middle of the night. Though neither Catherine nor I knew it, Dolly had left a note, which Verena found when she went for her morning coffee. As I understand it, this note simply said that we were going away and that Verena would not be bothered by us any more. She at once rang up her friend Morris Ritz at the Lola Hotel, and together they traipsed off to rouse the Sheriff. It was Verena's backing that had put the Sheriff into office; he was a fast-stepping, brassy young fellow with a brutal jaw and the bashful eyes of a cardsharp; his name was Junius Candle (can you believe it? the same Junius Candle who is a Senator today!). A searching party of deputies was gathered, telegrams were hurried off to sheriffs in other towns Many years later, when the Talbo estate was being settled, I came across the handwritten original of this telegram—composed, I believe, by Dr. Ritz *Be on lookout for following persons traveling together. Dolly Augusta Talbo,*

white, aged 60, yellow grayish hair, thin, height 5 feet 3, green eyes, probably insane but not likely to be dangerous, post description bakeries as she is cake eater Catherine Creek, Negro, pretends to be
age about 60, toothless, confused speech,
dangerous Col-
younger,
height 5 feet
posture,
scar at corner of mouth, surly natured All three wanted as runaways They sure haven't run far, Riley said in the post office, and postmistress Mrs. Peters rushed to the telephone to say Riley Henderson had seen us in the woods below the cemetery

While this was happening we were peaceably setting about to make the tree-house cozy From Catherine's satchel we took a rose and gold scrapquilt, and there was a deck of Rook cards, soap, rolls of toilet paper, oranges and lemons, candles, a frying pan, a bottle of blackberry wine, and two shoeboxes filled with food Catherine bragged that she'd robbed the pantry of everything, leaving not even a biscuit for That One's breakfast

Later, we all went to the creek and bathed our feet and faces in the cold water There are as many creeks in River Woods as there are veins in a leaf clear,
crackl
river
gator
her w

why are

orangeade and talked of the future Our assets were, forty-seven dollars in cash, and several pieces of jewelry, notably a gold fraternity ring Catherine had

Presently she went silent ... amazement down to where the woods opened upon

had a pistol flapping on his hip Sunmotes lilted around them like yellow butterflies, brambles brushed their starched town clothes, and Mrs Macy Wheeler, frightened by a vine that switched against her leg,

pistol He stared at us with puckered eyes, as if he

sentative, should have first say in everything The Reverend Buster cleared his throat, and his hands, as he rubbed them together, were like the dry scraping feelers of an insect "Dolly Talbo," he said, his voice very fine-sounding for so stringy stunted a man, "I speak to you on behalf of your sister, that good gracious woman "

"That she is," sang his wife, and Mrs Macy Wheeler parroted her

" who has this day received a grievous shock"

"That she has," echoed the ladies in their choir-trained voices

found in the intestines of a hog while stuffing sausages. According to Catherine, forty-seven dollars would buy us bus tickets anywhere: she knew somebody who had gone all the way to Mexico for fifteen dollars. Both Dolly and I were opposed to Mexico: for one thing, we didn't know the language. Besides, Dolly said we shouldn't venture outside the state, and wherever we went it ought to be near a forest, otherwise how would we be able to make the dropsy cure? "To tell you the truth, I think we should set up right here in River Woods," she said, gazing about speculatively.

"In this old tree?" said Catherine. "Just put that notion out of your head, Dollyheart." And then: "You recall how we saw in the paper where a man bought a castle across the ocean and brought it every bit home with him? You recall that? Well, we maybe could put my little house on a wagon and haul it down here." But as Dolly pointed out, the house belonged to Verena and was therefore not ours to haul away. Catherine answered: "You wrong, sugar. If you feed a man and wash his clothes and born his children, you and that man are married, that man is yours. If you sweep a house and tend its fires and fill its stove, and there is love in you all the years you are doing this, then you and that house are married, that house is yours. The way I see it, both those houses up there belong to us in the eyes of God: we could put That One right out."

I had an idea: down on the river below us there was a forsaken houseboat, green with the rust of water, half sunk; it had been the property of an old man who made his living catching catfish and who had been run out of town after applying for a certificate to marry a fifteen-year-old colored girl. My idea was: why shouldn't we fix up the old houseboat and live there?

Catherine said that if possible she hoped to spend the rest of her life on land. "Where the Lord intended

Christian, Charlie Cool My ideas of a Christian do not include laughing at and encouraging a poor mad woman."

"Mind who you name as mad, Thelma," said the Judge "That isn't especially Christian either."

The Reverend Buster opened fire "Answer me this, Judge Why did you come with us if it wasn't to do the Lord's will in a spirit of mercy?"

"The Lord's will?" said the Judge incredulously. "You don't know what that is any more than I do. Perhaps the Lord told these people to go live in a tree; you'll admit, at least, that He never told you to drag them out—unless, of course, Verena Talbo is the Lord, [illegible]

[illegible]

walk—the woods are very handsome at this time of year" He picked some brown violets and put them in his buttonhole

"To hell with all that," began the Sheriff, and was again interrupted by Mrs Buster, who said that under no circumstances would she tolerate swearing Will we, Reverend? and the Reverend, backing her up, said he'd be damned if they would "I'm in charge here," the Sheriff informed them, thrusting his bully-boy jaw. "This is a matter for the [illegible]"

[illegible]

years rather a longer time than you've lived Take care We have no legal right whatever to interfere with Miss Dolly"

Undaunted the Sheriff [illegible] the tree "

coaxingly

"Come on down from there, the pack of you" As [illegible] continued to sit like three nesting birds he show[illegible]

Dolly looked at Catherine, touched my hand, as though asking us to explain what was meant by the group glowering below like dogs gathered around a tree of trapped possums. Inadvertently, and just, I think [illegible] nds, she picked up one of [illegible]

"Shame on you," squalled Mrs. Buster, tossing her tiny baldish head: those who called her an old buzzard, and there were several, were not speaking of her character alone: in addition to a small vicious head, she had high hunched shoulders and a vast body. "I say shame on you. How can you have come so far from God as to sit up in a tree like a drunken Indian—sucking cigarettes like a common . . ."

"Floozy," supplied Mrs. Macy Wheeler.

". . . floozy, while your sister lies in misery flat on her back."

Maybe they were right in describing Catherine as dangerous, for she reared up and said: "Preacher lady, don't you go calling Dolly and us floozies; I'll come down there and slap you bowlegged." Fortunately, none of them could understand her; if they had, the Sheriff might have shot her through the head: no exaggeration; and many of the white people in town would have said he did right.

Dolly seemed stunned, at the same time self-possessed. You see, she simply dusted her skirt and said: "Consider a moment, Mrs. Buster, and you will realize that we are nearer God than you—by several yards."

"Good for you, Miss Dolly. I call that a good answer." The man who had spoken was Judge Cool; he clapped his hands together and chuckled appreciatively. "Of course they are nearer God," he said, unfazed by the disapproving, sober faces around him. "They're in a tree, and we're on the ground."

Mrs. Buster whirled on him. "I'd thought you were a

Christian, Charlie Cool My ideas of a Christian do not include laughing at and encouraging a poor mad woman."

"Mind who you name as mad, Thelma," said the judge "That isn't especially Christian either"

The Reverend Buster opened fire "Answer me this, [illegible] n't to do the [illegible] more than [illegible]

[illegible] a theory several of you give credence to, eh Sheriff? No sir, I did not come along to do anyone's will but my own which merely means that I felt like taking a walk—the woods are very handsome at this time of year" He picked some brown violets and put them in his buttonhole

[illegible] the Sheriff and [illegible]

we Reverend? and the Reverend backing her up, said he'd be damned if they would "I'm in charge here," the Sheriff informed them thrusting his bully-boy jaw. "This is a matter for the law"

"Whose law Junius?" inquired Judge Cool quietly. "Remember that I sat in the courthouse twenty-seven years rather a longer time than you've lived Take care We have no legal right whatever to interfere with Miss Dolly"

Undaunted the Sheriff hoisted himself a little into the tree "Let's don't have any more trouble," he said coaxingly and we could see his curved dog teeth. "Come on down from there the pack of you" As we continued to sit like three nesting birds he showed

more of his teeth and, as though he were trying to shake us out, angrily swayed a branch.

"Miss Dolly, you've always been a peaceful person," said Mrs Macy Wheeler. "Please come on home with us, you don't want to miss your dinner." Dolly replied matter-of-factly that we were not hungry, were they? "There's a drumstick for anybody that would like it."

Sheriff Candle said, "You make it hard on me, ma'am," and pulled himself nearer. A branch, cracking under his weight, sent through the tree a sad cruel thunder.

"If he lays a hand on any one of you, kick him in the head," advised Judge Cool. "Or I will," he said with sudden gallant pugnacity: like an inspired frog he hopped and caught hold to one of the Sheriff's dangling boots. The Sheriff in turn grabbed my ankles, and Catherine had to hold me around the middle. We were sliding; that we should all fall seemed inevitable, the strain was immense. Meanwhile Dolly started pouring what was left of our orangeade down the Sheriff's neck, and abruptly, shouting an obscenity, he let go of me. They crashed to the ground, the Sheriff on top of the Judge and the Reverend Buster crushed beneath them both. Mrs Macy Wheeler and Mrs Buster, augmenting the disaster, fell upon them with crowlike cries of distress.

Appalled by what had happened, and the part she herself had played, Dolly became so confused that she dropped the empty orangeade jar: it hit Mrs Buster on the head with a ripe thud. "Beg pardon," she apologized, though in the furor no one heard her.

When the tangle below unraveled, those concerned stood apart from each other embarrassedly, gingerly feeling of themselves. The Reverend looked rather flattened out, but no broken bones were discovered,

and only Mrs Buster, on whose skimpy-haired head a bump was pyramiding, could have justly complained of injury. She did so forthrightly "You attacked me, Dolly Talbo, don't deny it, everyone here is a witness, everyone saw you aim that mason jar at my head. Junius, arrest her!"

The Sheriff, however, was involved in settling differences of his own. Hands on hips, swaggering, he [illegible] the process of [illegible] "If you weren't [illegible]

straight body though not far from seventy, he looked to be in his fifties He clenched his fists and they were hard and hairy as coconuts "On the other hand," he said grimly, "I'm ready if you are"

At the moment it looked like a fair enough match. Even the Sheriff seemed not so sure of himself, with [illegible]

and trot along home"

[illegible]

dropped her veil, as though lowering a curtain on the [illegible]

[illegible] and, eyeing Dolly, then the Judge, added "You may imagine you are getting away with something But let me tell you there will be a retribution—not in heaven, right here on earth."

"Right here on earth," harmonized Mrs Macy Wheeler.

They left along the path, erect, haughty as a wedding procession, and passed into the sunlight where the red rolling grass swept up, swallowed them Lingering under the tree, the Judge smiled at us, and with a small courteous bow, said "Do I remember you offering a drumstick to anybody that would like it?"

[illegible]

as strips of bark Among the topmost branches were beards of silvery moss the color of his center-parted hair, and the cowhide sycamore leaves, sifting down from a neighboring taller tree, were the color of his cheeks Despite his canny, tomcat eyes, the general impression of his face made was that of someone shy and countrified Ordinarily he was not the one to make a show of himself, Judge Charlie Cool, there were many who had taken advantage of his modesty to set themselves above him Yet none of them could have claimed as he could, to be a graduate of Harvard University or to have twice traveled in Europe Still, there were those who were resentful and felt that he put on [illegible]

he wasn't stuck up, why, some people asked, had he gone all the way to Kentucky to find a wife instead of marrying one of our own women? I do not remember the Judge's wife, she died before I was old enough to be aware of her, therefore all that I repeat comes second-hand So the town never warmed up to Irene Cool, and apparently it was her own fault. Kentucky women are difficult to begin with, keyed-up, hellion-

hearted, and Irene Cool, who was born a Todd in Bowling Green (Mary Todd, a second cousin once removed, had married Abraham Lincoln) let everyone around here know she thought them a backward, vulgar lot. she received none of the ladies of the town, but Miss Palmer, who did sewing for her, spread news of how she'd transformed the Judge's house into a

cal doctors to attend her family, this though she herself was a semi-invalid a small backbone dislocation necessitated her sleeping on a bed of boards. There were crude jokes about the Judge getting full of splinters Nevertheless, he fathered two sons, Todd and Charles Jr, both born in Kentucky where their mother

admit old Charlie must surely have loved his Irene.

honeymoon She never came back; she is buried in Switzerland Not so long ago Carrie Wells, a school-

not find the Judge's wife, and it is funny to think of Irene Cool, serenely there on a mountain side still unwilling to receive There was not much left for the Judge when he came back, politicians like Meself Tallsap and his gang had come into power those boys couldn't afford to have Charlie Cool sitting in the courthouse It was sad to see the Judge, a fine-looking man dressed in narrow-cut suits with a black silk band sewn around his sleeve and a Cherokee rose in his buttonhole sad to see him with nothing to do except go to the post office or stop in at the bank His sons worked in the bank, prissy mouthed prudent men who might have been twins, for they both were marshmallow white, slump shouldered, watery eyed Charles Jr, he was the one who had lost his hair while still in college, was vice-president of the bank, and Todd, the younger son, was chief cashier In no way did they resemble their father, except that they had married Kentucky women These daughters in law had taken over the Judge's house and divided it into two apartments with separate entrances, there was an arrangement whereby the old man lived with first one son's family, then the other No wonder he d felt like taking a walk to the woods

"Thank you, Miss Dolly," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand "That s the best drumstick I ve had since I was a boy "

"It's the least we can do, a drumstick you were very brave ' There was in Dolly s voice an emotional, feminine tremor that struck me as unsuitable, not dignified, so, too, it must have seemed to Catherine she gave Dolly a reprimanding glance. "Won't you have something more, a piece of cake?"

"No ma'm, thank you, I ve had a sufficiency " He unloosened from his vest a gold watch and chain, then lassoed the chain to a strong twig above his head It

hung like a Christmas ornament, and its feathery faded ticking might have been the heartbeat of a deli- ... "If you can hear time pass-

shooting son"

... to ... be

known. "Before that, they must have sent off a hundred dollars worth of telegrams," he told us, tickled at the thought. ...

that

Sc...

sons ... of them behaving ugly that way. They seemed mad enough to kill us, though I can't see why, or what it has to do with Verena: she knew we were going away to leave her in peace. I told *her*. I even left a note. But if she's sick—is she, Judge? I've never known her to be."

"Never a day," said Catherine.

"Oh, she's upset all right," the Judge said with a certain *contentment*. "But Verena's not the woman to come down with anything an aspirin couldn't fix. I remember when she wanted to rearrange the cemetery, put up some kind of mausoleum to house herself and all you Talbos. One of the ladies around here came to me and said, Judge, don't you think Verena Talbo is the most morbid person in town, contemplating such a big tomb for herself? and I said, No, the only thing morbid was that she was willing to spend the money when not for an instant did she believe she was ever going to die."

"I don't like to hear talk against my sister," said

not find the Judge's wife, and it is funny to think of Irene Cool *serenely there on a mountain side still unwilling to receive* There was not much left for the Judge when he came back politicians like Meisell Tallsap and his gang had come into power those boys *couldn t afford to have Charlie Cool sitting in the* courthouse It was sad to see the Judge a fine looking man dressed in narrow cut suits with a black silk band sewn around his sleeve and a Cherokee rose in his but*tonhole sad to see him with nothing to do except go to* the post office or stop in at the bank His sons worked in the bank prissy mouthed prudent men who might have been twins, for they both were marshmallow white *slump shouldered watery eyed Charles Jr he* was the o
was vice
son was
their father, except that they had married Kentucky women These daughters in law had taken over the Judge's house and divided it into two apartments with separate entrances, there was an arrangement whereby *the old man lived with first one son s family*, then the other No wonder he d felt like taking a walk to the woods

'Thank you, Miss Dolly," he said wiping his mouth *with the back of his hand "That s the best drumstick* I ve had since I was a boy "

"It s the least we can do a drumstick, you were very brave There was in Dolly s voice an emotional fem*inine tremor that struck me as unsuitable not digni*fied so too, it must have seemed to Catherine she gave Dolly a reprimanding glance "Won t you have something more a piece of cake?"

"*No ma'm thank you I ve had a sufficiency*' He unloosened from his vest a gold watch and chain then lassoed the chain to a strong twig above his head it

hung like a Christmas ornament, and its feathery faded ticking might have been the heartbeat of a delicate thing, a firefly, a frog "If you can hear time passing it makes the day last longer I've come to appreciate a long day" He brushed back the fur of the squirrels, which lay curled in a corner as though they were only asleep "Right through the head good shooting son"

Of course I gave the credit to the proper party "Riley Henderson, was it?" said the Judge and went on to say it was Riley who had let *our* whereabouts be known. "Before that they must have sent off a hundred dollars worth of telegrams" he told us, tickled at the thought. "I guess it was the idea of all that money that made Verena take to her bed"

Scowling Dolly said "It doesn't make a particle of sense all of them behaving ugly that way They seemed mad enough to kill us though I can't see why, or what it has to do with Verena she knew we were going away to leave her in peace, I told her I even left a note But if she's sick—is she Judge? I've never known her to be"

"Never a day" said Catherine

"Oh she's upset all right," the Judge said with a certain contentment But Verena's not the woman to come down with anything an aspirin couldn't fix I remember when she wanted to rearrange the cemetery put up some kind of mausoleum to house herself and all you Talbos One of the ladies around here came to me and said Judge don't you think Verena Talbo is the most morbid person in town contemplating such a big tomb for herself? and I said No, the only thing morbid was that she was willing to spend the money when not for an instant did she believe she was ever going to die"

"I don't like to hear talk against my sister," said

Dolly curtly. "She's worked hard, she deserves to have things as she wants them It's our fault, someway we failed her, there was no place for us in her house"

Catherine's cotton-wadding squirmed in her jaw like chewing tobacco "Are you my Dollyheart? or some hypocrite? He's a friend, you ought to tell him the truth, how That One and the little Jew was stealing our medicine "

The Judge applied for a translation, but Dolly said it was simply nonsense, nothing worth repeating and, diverting him, asked if he knew how to skin a squirrel Nodding dreamily, he gazed away from us, above us, his acornlike eyes scanning the sky-fringed, breeze-fooled leaves "It may be that there is no place for any of us Except we know there is, somewhere, and if we found it, but lived there only a moment, we could count ourselves blessed This could be your place" he said shivering as though in the sky spreading wings had cast a cold shade "And mine"

Subtly as the gold watch spun its sound of time, the afternoon curved toward twilight Mist from the river, autumn haze, trailed moon colors among the bronze, the blue trees and a halo an image of winter, ringed the paling sun Still the Judge did not leave us "Two women and a boy? at the mercy of night? and Junius Candle, those fools up to God knows what? I'm sticking with you" Surely of the four of us, it was the Judge who had most found his place in the tree It was a pleasure to watch him, all twinkly as a hare's nose, and feeling himself a man again, more than that, a protector He skinned the squirrels with a jackknife, while in the dusk I gathered sticks and built under the tree a fire for the frying pan Dolly opened the bottle of blackberry wine, she tified this by referring to a chill in the air. The sc

rels turned out quite well, very tender, and the Judge said proudly that we should taste his fried catfish sometime We sipped the wine in silence a smell of leaves and smoke carrying from the cooling fire called up thoughts of other autumns, and we sighed, heard, like sea-roar, singings in the field of grass A candle flickered in a mason jar, and gipsy moths, balanced, blowing about the flame, seemed to pilot its scarf of yellow among the black branches

There was, just then, not a footfall, but a nebulous sense of intrusion it might have been nothing more than the moon coming out Except there was no moon nor stars It was dark as the blackberry wine. "I think there is someone--something down there," s[illegible] Dolly expressing what we all felt.

[illegible] with the conviction of a soldier Answer up, who goes there?"

"Me Riley Henderson" It was indeed He separated from the shadows, and his upraised, grinning face looked warped, wicked in the candlelight. "Just thought I'd see how you were getting on Hope you're not sore at me I wouldn't have told where you were, not if I'd known what it was all about."

"Nobody blames you son" said the Judge, and I remembered it was he who had championed Riley's cause against his uncle Horace Holton, there was an understanding between them "We're enjoying a small taste of wine I'm sure Miss Dolly would be pleased to have you join us"

Catherine complained there was no room, another ounce and those old boards would give way Still, we scrunched together to make a place for Riley, who had no sooner squeezed into it than Catherine

Dolly curtly. "She's worked hard, she deserves to have things as she wants them It's our fault, someway we failed her, there was no place for us in her house"

Catherine's cotton wadding squirmed in her jaw like chewing tobacco "Are you my Dollyheart? or some hypocrite? He's a friend you ought to tell him the truth, how That One and the little Jew was stealing our medicine"

The Judge applied for a translation but Dolly said it was simply nonsense, nothing worth repeating and, diverting him, asked if he knew how to skin a squirrel. Nodding dreamily, he gazed away from us, above us, his acornlike eyes scanning the sky fringed, breeze fooled leaves "It may be that there is no place for any of us Except we know there is somewhere, and if we found it, but lived there only a moment, we could count ourselves blessed This could be your place he said shivering as though in the sky spreading wings had cast a cold shade "And mine"

Subtly as the gold watch spun its sound of time, the afternoon curved toward twilight Mist from the river, autumn haze, trailed moon colors among the bronze, the blue trees and a halo an image of winter, ringed the paling sun Still the Judge did not leave us "Two women and a boy? at the mercy of night? and Junius Candle those fools up to God knows what? I'm sticking with you" Surely, of the four of us it was the Judge who had most found his place in the tree It was a pleasure to watch him all twinkly as a hare's nose and feeling himself a man again more than that a protector He skinned the squirrels with a jackknife, while in the dusk I gathered sticks and built under the tree a fire for the frying pan Dolly opened the bottle of blackberry wine, she justified this by referring to a chill in the air The squir-

Three

"We must know our position to defend it, that is a primary rule Therefore what has brought us together? Trouble Miss Dolly and her friends they are in trouble. You, Riley we both are in trouble We belong in this tree or we wouldn t be here" Dolly grew silent under the confident sound of the Judge's voice he said "Today when I started out with the Sheriff's party I was a man convinced that his life will have passed uncommunicated and without trace I think now that I will not have been so unfortunate Miss Dolly how long? fifty sixty years? it was that far ago that I remember you a stiff and blushing child riding to town in your father s wagon—never getting down from the wagon because you didn't want us town children to see you had no shoes"

"They had shoes Dolly and That One" Catherine muttered "It was me that didn t have no shoes"

"All the years that I ve seen you never known you not ever recognized, as I did today what you are a spirit a pagan "

"A pagan?" said Dolly alarmed but interested

"At least, then, a spirit someone not to be c culated by the eye alone Spirits are acceptors life they grant its differences—and consequently always in trouble Myself I should never have b a Judge as such I was too often on the wrong s the law doesn t admit differences Do you remem old Carper the fisherman who had a housebo

therine said "I'm no man with any dozen faces
[illegible] he told her, if she

[illegible]

ets?" she finished lamely
Secrets no no." The [illegible]

was pleading "Speak of the night the fact there is moon. What one says hardly matters only the ist with which it is said, the sympathy with which is received. Irene my wife a remarkable woman might have shared anything and yet, yet nothing us combined we could not touch She died in my ms, and at the last I said Are you happy Irene? ve I made you happy? Happy happy happy those ere her last words equivocal. I have never under ood whether she was saying yes or merely answer ig with an echo I should know if I'd ever known er My sons I do not enjoy their esteem I've wanted , more as a man than as a father Unfortunately they eel they know something shameful about me I'll tell ou what it is" His virile eyes faceted with candle- glow examined us one by one as though testing our attention, trust. "Five years ago nearer six, I sat down in a train seat where some child had left a child's magazine I picked it up and was looking through it when I saw on the back cover addresses of children who wanted to correspond with other children There was a little girl in Alaska, her name appealed to me Heather Falls I sent her a picture postcard Lord it seemed a harmless and pleasant thing to do She answered at once and the letter quite astonished me it was a very intelligent account of life in Alaska—charming descriptions of her father's

Catherine said, "I'm no man with any dozen faces: the notion," which irritated Dolly, who told her if she couldn't speak respectably why not just go to sleep. "But Judge," said Dolly, "I'm not sure I know what it is you have in mind we should tell each other. Secrets?" she finished lamely.

"Secrets, no, no." The Judge scratched a match and relighted the candle, his face sprang upon us with an expression unexpectedly pathetic: we must help him, he was pleading. "Speak of the night, the fact there is no moon. What one says hardly matters, only the trust with which it is said, the sympathy with which it is received. Irene, my wife, a remarkable woman, we might have shared anything, and yet, yet nothing in us combined we could not touch. She died in my arms, and at the last I said, Are you happy, Irene? have I made you happy? Happy happy happy, those were her last words: equivocal. I have never understood whether she was saying yes, or merely answering with an echo. I should know if I'd ever known her. My sons I do not enjoy their esteem. I've wanted it, more as a man than as a father. Unfortunately, they feel they know something shameful about me. I'll tell you what it is." His virile eyes, faceted with candleglow, examined us one by one, as though testing our attention, trust. "Five years ago, nearer six, I sat down in a train-seat where some child had left a child's magazine. I picked it up and was looking through it when I saw on the back cover addresses of children who wanted to correspond with other children. There was a little girl in Alaska, her name appealed to me, Heather Falls. I sent her a picture postcard. Lord, it seemed a harmless and pleasant thing to do. She answered at once, and the letter quite astonished me: it was a very intelligent account of life in Alaska—charming descriptions of her father's

sheep ranch, of northern lights She was thirteen and enclosed a photograph of herself—not pretty, but a wise and kind looking child. I hunted through some old albums, and found a Kodak made on a fishing trip when I was fifteen—out in the sun and with a trout in my hand it looked new enough I wrote her as though I were still that boy, told her of the gun I'd got for Christmas, how the dog had had pups and what we'd named them, described a tent-show that had come to town To be growing up again and have a sweetheart in Alaska—well, it was fun for an old man sitting alone listening to the noise of a clock. Later on she wrote she d fallen in love with a fellow she knew, and I felt a real pang of jealousy, the way a youngster would, but we have remained friends. two years ago when I told her I was getting ready for law school, she sent me a gold nugget—it would bring me luck she said" He took it from his pocket and held it out for us to see it made her come so close, Heather Falls, as though the gently bright gift balanced in his palm was part of her heart.

"And that's what they think is shameful?" said Dolly more piqued than indignant Because you've helped keep company a lonely little child in Alaska? It snows there so much

Judge Cool closed his hand over the nugget. "Not that they've mentioned it to me But I've heard them talking at night, my sons and their wives wanting to know what to do about me Of course they'd spied out the letters I don't believe in locking drawers—seems strange a man can't live without keys in what was at least once his own house They think it all a sign of . . ." He tapped his head

"I had a letter once Collin, sugar, pour me a taste," said Catherine, indicating the wine "Sure enough, I had a letter once, still got it somewhere, kept it

twenty years wondering who was wrote it. Said Hello Catherine, come on to Miami and marry with me, love Bill."

"Catherine. A man asked you to marry him—and you never told one word of it to me?"

Catherine lifted a shoulder "Well Dollyheart, what was the Judge saying? You don't tell anybody everything Besides I've known a peck of Bills—wouldn't study marrying any of them What worries my mind is which one of the Bills was it wrote that letter? I'd like to know seeing as it's the only letter I ever got. It could be the Bill that put the roof on my house course by the time the roof was up—my goodness I have got old, been a long day since I've given it two thoughts There was Bill that came to plow the garden spring of 1913 it was that man sure could plow a straight row And Bill that built the chicken-coop went away on a Pullman job, might have been him wrote me that letter Or Bill—uh uh, his name was Fred—Collin, sugar this wine is mighty good."

"I may have a drop more myself said Dolly. "I mean Catherine has given me such a "

"Hmn said Catherine

"If you spoke more slowly or chewed less " The Judge thought Catherine's cotton was tobacco

Riley had withdrawn a little from us slumped over, he stared sulkily into the inhabited dark [illegible], a bird cried. I'm not wrong, Judge he said

"How so [illegible]"

The [illegible] that I associated with [illegible] swamped his face I'm not in trouble I'm nothing—[illegible] call that my trouble? I lie awake thinking what do I know how to do? hunt drive a car [illegible] scared when I think maybe that's all it will ever come to Another thing, I've got

first," said the Judge, turning up his coat-collar. "How could you care about one girl? Have you ever cared about one leaf?"

Riley, listening to the wildcat with an itchy hunter's look, snatched at the leaves blowing about us like midnight butterflies, alive, fluttering as though to escape and fly, one stayed trapped between his fingers. The Judge, too, he caught a leaf, and it was worth more in his hand than in Riley's. Pressing it mildly against his cheek, he distantly said, "We are *speaking* of love. A leaf, a handful of seed--begin with these, learn a little what it is to love. First, a leaf, a fall of rain, then someone to receive what a leaf has *taught* you, what a fall of rain has ripened. No easy process, understand, it could take a lifetime, it has mine, and still I've never mastered it--I only know how true it is: that love is a chain of love, as nature is a chain of life."

"Then," said Dolly with an intake of breath, "I've been in love all my life." She sank down into the quilt. "Well, no," and her voice fell off, "I guess not. I've never loved a," while she searched for the word wind frolicked her veil, "gentleman. You might say that I've never had the opportunity. Except Papa," she paused, as though she'd said too much. A gauze of starlight wrapped her closely as the quilt, some-

etch-

"Bu

pink

when I was a child I had one colored crayon, and was pink. I drew pink cats, pink trees--for thirty-fo years I lived in a pink room. And the box I kept, somewhere in the attic now. I must ask

of an orange stuck w

no feelings—except for my sisters, which is different Take for instance, I've been going with this girl from Rock City nearly a year, the longest time I've stayed with one girl I guess it was a week ago she flared up and said where's your heart? said if I didn't love her she'd as soon die So I stopped the car on the railroad track, well, I said, let's just sit here, the Crescent's due in about twenty minutes We didn't take our eyes off each other, and I thought isn't it mean that I'm looking at you and I don't feel anything except . ."

"Except vanity? said the Judge

Riley did not deny it "And if my sisters were old enough to take care of themselves, I'd have been willing to wait for the Crescent to come down on us'

It made my stomach hurt to hear him talk like that, I longed to tell him he was all I wanted to be

"You said before about the one person in the world Why couldn't I think of her like that? It's what I want, I'm no good by myself Maybe, if I could care for somebody that way, I'd make plans and carry them out buy that stretch of land past Parson's Place and build houses on it—I could do it if I got quiet"

Wind surprised, pealed the leaves, parted night clouds, showers of starlight were let loose our candle, as though intimidated by the incandescence of the opening star stabbed sky, toppled, and we could see, unwrapped above us a late wayaway wintery moon it was like a slice of snow, near and far creatures called to it, hunched moon eyed frogs a claw voiced wildcat Catherine hauled out the rose scrapquilt, insisting Dolly wrap it around herself, then she tucked her arms around me and scratched my head until I let it relax on her bosom—You cold? she said, and I wiggled closer she was good and warm as the old kitchen

"Son, I'd say you were going at it the wrong end

ver my own head Dollyheart,
ion of that quilt man's shiver-
en."
a wing of the quilt and nodded
not at all shy slipped under it.
China tree swayed like immense
sea rolling and chilled by the far
Riley sat hunched up in himself
uggle up hard head you
aid Catherine offering him
that I occupied on her left
to, maybe he noticed that
ed, or maybe he thought it
e on Riley, Catherine s good
a quilt After a while Riley
s quiet for so long I thought
sleep Then I felt Catherine
to me who it was sent my
at One, thats who Sure as
Creek she got some nigger in
r, thinking I'd scoot off there
again" Dolly sleepily said
eyes "Nothing to be afraid
atch out for us" A branch
ited the tree I saw the
It was the last thing I saw.

cloves and a jaybird's egg—when I loved those love collected inside me so that it went flying about like a bird in a sunflower field. But it's best not to show such things, it burdens people and makes them, I don't know why, unhappy. Verena scolds at me for what she calls hiding in corners, but I'm afraid of scaring people if I show that I care for them. Like Paul Jimson's wife: after he got sick and couldn't deliver the papers any more, remember she took over his route? poor thin little thing just dragging herself with that sack of papers. It was one cold afternoon, she came up on the porch her nose running and tears of cold hanging in her eyes—she put down the paper, and I said wait, hold on, and took my handkerchief to wipe her eyes. I wanted to say, if I could, that I was sorry and that I loved her—my hand grazed her face, she turned with the smallest shout and ran down the steps. Then on, she always tossed the papers from the street, and whenever I heard them hit the porch it sounded in my bones."

"Paul Jimson's wife: worrying yourself over trash like that!" said Catherine, rinsing her mouth with the last of the wine. "I've got a bowl of goldfish, just 'cause I like them don't make me love the world. Love a lot of mess, my foot. You can talk what you want, not going to do anything but harm, bringing up what's best forgot. People ought to keep more things to themselves. The deepdown ownself part of you, that's the good part: what's left of a human being that goes around speaking his privates? The Judge, he say we all up here 'cause of trouble some kind. Shoot! We here for very plain reasons. One is, this our tree-house, and two, That One and the Jew's trying to steal what belongs to us. Three: you here, every one of you, 'cause you want to be: the deepdown part of you tells you so. This last don't apply

cloves and a jaybird's egg—when I loved those love collected inside me so that it went flying about like a bird in a sunflower field. But it's best not to show such things, it burdens people and makes them don't know why, unhappy. Verena scolds at me what she calls hiding in corners, but I'm afraid scaring people if I show that I care for them. Li Paul Jimson's wife; after he got sick and could deliver the papers any more, remember she took ov his route? poor thin little thing just dragging hers with that sack of papers. It was one cold afternoo she came up on the porch her nose running and tea of cold hanging in her eyes—she put down the pap and I said wait, hold on, and took my handkerchi to wipe her eyes; I wanted to say, if I could, that was sorry and that I loved her—my hand grazed h face, she turned with the smallest shout and ra down the steps Then on, she always tossed the p pers from the street, and whenever I heard them h the porch it sounded in my bones."

"Paul Jimson's wife: worrying yourself over tras like that!" said Catherine, rinsing her mouth with th last of the wine. "I've got a bowl of goldfish, ju 'cause I like them don't make me love the world Love a lot of mess, my foot. You can talk what yo want, not going to do anything but harm, bringin up what's best forgot. People ought to keep mor things to themselves. The deepdown ownself part o you, that's the good part: what's left of a huma being that goes around speaking his privates? Th Judge, he say we all up here 'cause of trouble som kind. Shoot! We here for very plain reasons. One is this our tree-house, and two, That One and the Jew' trying to steal what belongs to us. Three: you here every one of you, 'cause you want to be: the deep-down part of you tells you so. This last do

to me I like a roof over my own head. Dollyheart,

to him the Judge not at all shy slipped under it.

like a pitiful orphan "Snuggle up hard head you cold like anybody else" said Catherine offering him the position on her right that I occupied on her left He didn't seem to want to maybe he noticed that she smelled like bitterweed or maybe he thought it was sissy but I said come on Riley Catherine's good and warm better than a quilt After a while Riley moved over to us It was quiet for so long I thought everyone had gone to sleep Then I felt Catherine stiffen "It's just come to me who it was sent my letter Bill Nobody That One that's who Sure as my name's Catherine Creek she got some nigger in Miami to mail me a letter thinking I'd scoot off there never to be heard from again" Dolly sleepily said hush now hush shut your eyes Nothing to be afraid of we've men here to watch out for us A branch swung back moonlight invited the tree I saw the Judge take Dolly's hand It was the last thing I saw

for him. Through brown briars, under grown trees, we walked deep in the woods down to the river.

Leaves like scarlet hands floated on the green slow water; a poking end of a drowned log seemed the peering head of some river beast. We moved on to the old houseboat, where the water was clearer. The houseboat was slightly tipped over; drifts of water-bay sheddings were like a rich rust on its roof and declining deck. The inside cabin had a mystifying tended-to look. Scattered around were issues of an adventure magazine; there was a kerosene lamp and a line of beer empties ranged on a table; the bunk sported a blanket, a pillow, and the pillow was colored with pink markings of lipstick. In a rush I realized the houseboat was someone's hide-out, then from the grin taking over Riley's homely face I knew whose it was. "What's *more*," he said, "you can get in a little fishing on the side. Don't you tell anybody." I crossed an admiring heart.

While we were undressing I had a kind of dream: I dreamed the houseboat had been launched on the river with the five of us aboard: our laundry flapped like sails, in the pantry a coconut cake was cooking, a geranium bloomed on the windowsill—together we floated over changing rivers past varying views.

The last of summer warmed the climbing sun, but the water at first plunge sent me chattering and chicken-skinned back to the deck, where I stood watching Riley unconcernedly propel himself to and fro between the banks. An island of bamboo reeds standing like the legs of cranes shivered in a shallow patch, and Riley waded out among them with lowered hunting eyes. He signaled to me. Though it hurt, I eased down into the cold river and swam to join him. The water bending the bamboo was clear [illegible] knee-deep basins—Riley hovered

Four

RILEY WAS THE FIRST TO WAKE, and he wakened me. On the skyline three morning stars swooned in th flush of an arriving sun, dew tinseled the leaves, a jet chain of blackbirds swung out to meet the mount ing light. Riley beckoned for me to come with him we slid silently down through the tree. Catherine snoring with abandon, did not hear us go, nor di Dolly and the Judge who, like two children lost in a witch-ruled forest, were asleep with their cheek together.

We headed toward the river, Riley leading th way. The legs of his canvas trousers whispered against each other. Every little bit he stopped and stretched himself, as though he'd been riding on a train. Somewhere we came to a hill of already abou and busy red ants. Riley unbuttoned his fly and be gan to flood them. I don't know that it was funny, but I laughed to keep him company. Naturally I was insulted when he switched around and peed on my shoe. I thought it meant he had no respect for me. I said to him why would he want to do a thing like that? Don't you know a joke? he said, and threw a hugging arm around my shoulder.

If such events can be dated, this I would say was the moment Riley Henderson and I became friends, the moment, at least, when there began in him an affectionate feeling for me that supported my own

Stover was legally born a bastard, the other two made the grade on their own. It was Big Eddie that went for me and I slammed my catfish flat in his face. Catherine said, "You leave my baby be, he's an orphan", and when she saw that he had me around the waist: "In the booboos, Collin, kick his old booboos." So I did. Big Eddie's face curdled like clabber. Jack Mill (he's the one who a year later got locked in the ice-plant and froze to death: served him right) snatched at me, but I bolted across the field and crouched down in the tallest grass. I don't think they bothered to look for me, they had their hands so full with Catherine: she fought them the whole way, and I watched her, sick with knowing there was no help to give, until they passed out of sight over the ridge into the cemetery.

Overhead two squawking crows crossed, recrossed, as though making an evil sign. I crept toward the woods—near me then I heard boots cutting through the grass. It was the Sheriff: with him was a man called Will Harris. Tall as a door, buffalo-shouldered, Will Harris had once had his throat eaten out by a mad dog: the scars were bad enough, but his damaged voice was worse: it sounded girlish and baby-fied, like a midget's. They passed so close I could have untied Will's shoes. His tiny voice, shrilling at the Sheriff, jumped with Morris Ritz's name and Verena's. I couldn't make out exactly, except something had happened about Morris Ritz and Verena had sent Will to bring back the Sheriff. The Sheriff said: "What in hell does the woman want, an army?" When they were gone I sprang up and ran into the woods.

In sight of the China tree I hid behind a fan of fern. I thought one of the Sheriff's men might still be hanging around. But there was nothing, simply a lonely summer bird. And no one in the tree house.

above one in the thin pool a coal black catfish lay dozingly trapped We closed in upon it with fingers tense as fork prongs thrashing backwards, it flung itself straight into my hands The flailing razory whiskers made a gash across my palm, still I had the sense to hold on—thank goodness, for it's the only fish I ever caught Most people don't believe it when I tell about catching a catfish barehanded, I say well ask Riley Henderson We drove a spike of bamboo through its gills and swam back to the houseboat holding it aloft Riley said it was one of the fattest catfish he'd ever seen we would take it back to the tree and, since he'd bragged what a great hand he was at frying a catfish, let the Judge fix it for breakfast As it turned out, that fish never got eaten

All this time at the tree house there was a terrible situation During our absence Sheriff Candle had returned backed by deputies and a warrant of arrest Meanwhile, unaware of what was in store, Riley and I lazed along kicking over toadstools, sometimes stopping to skip rocks on the water

We still were some distance away when rioting voices reached us, they rang in the trees like axe-blows I heard Catherine scream roar, rather It made such soup of my legs I couldn't keep up with [illegible]

Catherine

Her dress was ripped down the front she was good as naked Ray Oliver Jack Mill, and Big Eddie Stover, three grown men, cronies of the Sheriff, were dragging and slapping her through the grass I wanted to kill them, and Catherine was trying to but she didn't stand a chance—though she butted them with her head, bounced them with her elbows Big Eddie

bably never would have caught her. I told of what
l taken place in the field of grass.
But Dolly really wanted not to hear. As though

me this. and I can't. Collin, what do you think: is
that after all the world is a bad place? Last night I
w it so differently."
The Judge focused his eyes on mine. he was trying,
think, to tell me how to answer. But I knew myself,

hared with Catherine and me, to feel the winds of
wickedness that circulate elsewhere No, Dolly, the
world is not a bad place She passed a hand across her
forehead "If you are right, then in a moment Catherine will be walking under the tree—she won't have
found you or Riley, but she will have come back."
"By the way," said the Judge, "where is Riley?"
He'd run ahead of me, that was the last I'd seen of
him, with an anxiety that struck us simultaneously,
the Judge and I stood up and started yelling his
name.

hen abruptly the Judge put a finger to his lips

dear friends and wore white matching sweaters.
abeth was carrying a violin case.
abeth," said the Judge, startling

smoky as ghosts, streamers of sunlights illuminated its emptiness Numbly I moved into view and leaned my head against the tree's trunk, at this, the vis of the houseboat returned our laundry flapped, the geranium bloomed, the carrying river carried us out to sea into the world

'Collin" My name fell out of the sky "Is that you . hear? are you crying?"

It was Dolly, calling from somewhere I could no see—until, climbing to the tree's heart, I saw in the above distance Dolly's dangling childish shoe "Careful boy," said the Judge, who was beside her, "you'll shake us out of here' Indeed, like gulls resting on a ship's mast, they were sitting in the absolute tower of the tree, afterwards, Dolly was to remark that the view afforded was so enthralling she regretted not having visited there before The Judge, it developed, had seen the approach of the Sheriff and his men in time for them to take refuge in those heights "Wait, we're coming" she said, and, with one arm steadied by the Judge, she descended like a fine lady sweeping down a flight of stairs

We kissed each other, she continued to hold me "She went to look for you—Catherine, we didn't know where you were and I was so afraid, I " Her fear tingled my hands she felt like a shaking small animal, a rabbit just taken from the trap The Judge looked on with humbled eyes, fumbling hands, he seemed to feel in the way, perhaps because he thought he'd failed us in not preventing what had happened to Catherine But then, what could he have done? Had he gone to her aid he would only have got himself caught they weren't fooling the Sheriff, Big Eddie Stover and the others I was the one to feel guilty If Catherine hadn't gone to look for me they

probably never would have caught her I told of what had taken place in the field of grass

But Dolly really wanted not to hear As though scattering a dream she brushed back her veil "I want to believe Catherine is gone and I can t If I could I would run to find her I want to believe Verena has done this and I can t Collin what do you think is it that after all the world is a bad place? Last night I saw it so differently"

The Judge focused his eyes on mine he was trying I think, to tell me how to answer But I knew myself No matter what passions compose them all private worlds are good they are never vulgar places Dolly had been made too civilized by her own the one she shared with Catherine and me to feel the winds of wickedness that circulate elsewhere No Dolly, the world is not a bad place She passed a hand across her forehead "If you are right, then in a moment Cath erine will be walking under the tree—she won t have found you or Riley but she will have come back"

"By the way" said the Judge "where *is* Riley?"

He d run ahead of me that was the last I d seen of im with an anxiety that struck us simultaneously, he Judge and I stood up and started yelling his ame Our voices curving slowly around the woods gain again swung back on silence I knew what had ppened he d fallen into an old Indian well—many s the case I could tell you of I was about to suggest this when abruptly the Judge put a finger to his lips The man must have had ears like a dog I couldn t hear a sound But he was right there was someone on the path It turned out to be Maude Riordan and Ri ley s older sister the smart one Elizabeth They were very dear friends and wore white matching sweaters Elizabeth was carrying a violin case

"Look here Elizabeth," said the Judge startling

the girls for as yet they had not discovered us "Look here child, have you seen your brother?"

Maude recovered first and it was she who answered "We sure have, she said emphatically "I was walking Elizabeth home from her lesson when Riley came along doing ninety miles an hour, nearly ran us over You should speak to him Elizabeth Anyway he asked us to come down here and tell you not to worry, said he d explain everything later Whatever that means "

Both Maude and Elizabeth had been in my class at school they d jumped a grade and graduated the previous June I knew Maude especially well because for a summer I d taken piano lessons from her mother her father taught violin and Elizabeth Henderson was one of his pupils Maude herself played the violin beautifully just a week before I'd read in the town paper where she d been invited to play on a radio program in Birmingham I was glad to hear it. The Riordans were nice people considerate and cheerful It was not because I wanted to learn piano that I took lessons with Mrs Riordan—rather, I liked her blond largeness the sympathetic educated talk that went on while we sat before the splendid upright that smelled of polish and attention and what I particularly liked was afterwards when Maude would ask me to have a lemonade on the cool back porch She was snub-nosed and elfin eared a skinny excitable girl who from her father had inherited Irish black eyes and from her mother platinum hair pale as morning—not the least like her best friend the soulful and shadowy Elizabeth I don t know what those two talked about books and music maybe But with me Maude s subjects were boys dates drugstore slander didn t I think it was terrible the awful girls Riley Henderson chased around with? she felt so

sorry for Elizabeth, and thought it wonderful how, despite all, Elizabeth held up her head It didn't take genius to see that Maude was heartset on Riley, nevertheless I imagined for a while that I [illegible] with her [illegible]

Cathe [illegible]

—noth [illegible] man's crazy to give her the time of day Once I showed Maude a big evening made for her with my own hands [illegible] saw than [illegible]

[illegible] though she hadn't expected to be kissed good night "I don't think that's necessary, Collin—though it was cute of you to take me out" I was let down, you can see why, but as I didn't allow myself to brood over it our friendship went on little changed One day, at the end of a lesson, Mrs Riordan omitted the usual new piece for home practice, instead, she kindly informed me that she preferred not to continue with my lessons "We're very fond of you, Collin, I don't have to say that you're welcome in this house at any time But dear, the truth is you have no ability for music, it happens that way occasionally, and I don't think it's fair on either of us to pretend otherwise" She was right, all the same my pride was hurt, I couldn't help feeling pushed-out, it made me miserable to think of the Riordans, and gradually, in about the time it took to forget my few hard learned tunes, I drew a curtain on them At first Maude used to stop me after school and ask me over to her house, one way or another I always got out of it, furthermore, it was winter then and I liked to stay in the kitchen with Dolly and Catherine Catherine wanted to know How come you don't talk any more about Maude Riordan? I said because I don't, that's all But while I didn't talk, I

the girls, for as yet they had not discovered us "Lo here, child, have you seen your brother?"

Maude recovered first, and it was she who a swered "We sure have," she said emphatically "I w walking Elizabeth home from her lesson when Ril came along doing ninety miles an hour, nearly ran over You should speak to him, Elizabeth Anyway, l asked us to come down here and tell you not worry, said he'd explain everything later Whatev that means"

Both Maude and Elizabeth had been in my class school, they'd jumped a grade and graduated the pre vious June I knew Maude especially well because fo a summer I'd taken piano lessons from her mother her father taught violin, and Elizabeth Henderso was one of his pupils Maude herself played the vio lin beautifully, just a week before I'd read in the town paper where she'd been invited to play on a radio program in Birmingham I was glad to hear it The Riordans were nice people, considerate and cheerful It was not because I wanted to learn piano that I took lessons with Mrs Riordan—rather, I liked her blond largeness, the sympathetic, educated talk that went on while we sat before the splendid upright that smelled of polish and attention, and what I particularly liked was afterwards when Maude would ask me to have a lemonade on the cool back porch She was snub nosed and elfin-eared a skinny excitable girl who from her father had inherited Irish black eyes and from her mother platinum hair pale as morning—not the least like her best friend, the soulful and shadowy Elizabeth I don't know what those two talked about, books and music maybe But with me Maude's subjects were boys, dates, drugstore slander didn't I think it was terrible, the awful girls Riley Henderson chased around with? she felt so

sorry for Elizabeth, and thought it wonderful how, despite all, Elizabeth held up her head It didn't take

—nothing on her to pinch, a man's crazy to give her the time of day Once I showed Maude a big evening, made for her with my own hands a sweet pea corsage, then took her to Phil's Cafe where we had Kansas [illegible] steaks, afterwards, there was a dance at the Lola [illegible]tel Still she behaved as though she hadn't ex[illegible]cted to be kissed good night "I don't think that's [illegible]cessary, Collin—though it was cute of you to take [illegible]e out." I was let down, you can see why, but as I [illegible]dn't allow myself to brood over it our friendship [illegible]ent on little changed One day, at the end of a les[illegible]on, Mrs Riordan omitted the usual new piece for [illegible]ome practice, instead, she kindly informed me that [illegible]he preferred not to continue with my lessons "We're [illegible]ery fond of you, Collin, I don't have to say that [illegible]ou're welcome in this house at any time But dear, [illegible]he truth is you have no ability for music, it happens [illegible]hat way occasionally, and I don't think it's fair on [illegible]ither of us to pretend otherwise" She was right, all the same my pride was hurt, I couldn't help feeling pushed-out, it made me miserable to think of the [illegible]

and ask me over to her house, one way or another I always got out of it, furthermore, it was winter then and I liked to stay in the kitchen with Dolly and Catherine Catherine wanted to know How come you don't talk any more about Maude Riordan? I said because I don't, that's all. But while I didn't talk, I

must have been thinking; at least, seeing her ther under the tree, old feelings squeezed my chest. Fc the first time I considered the circumstances sel consciously: did we, Dolly, the Judge and I, strik Maude and Elizabeth as a ludicrous sight? I could b judged by them, they were my own age. But fror their manner we might just have met on the street o at the drugstore.

The Judge said, "Maude, how's your daddy? Hear he hasn't been feeling too good."

"He can't complain. You know how men are, al ways looking for an ailment. And yourself, sir?"

"That's a pity," said the Judge, his mind wander ing. "You give your daddy my regards, and tell him I hope he feels better."

Maude submitted agreeably: "I will, sir, thank you. I know he'll appreciate your concern." Draping her skirt, she dropped on the moss and settled beside her an unwilling Elizabeth. For Elizabeth no one used a nickname; you might begin by calling her Betty, but in a week it would be Elizabeth again: that was her effect. Languid, banana-boned, she had dour black hair and an apathetic, at moments saintly face—in an enamel locket worn around her lily-stalk neck she preserved a miniature of her missionary father. "Look, Elizabeth, isn't that a becoming hat Miss Dolly has on? Velvet, with a veil."

Dolly roused herself; she patted her head. "I don't generally wear hats—we intended to travel."

"We heard you'd left home," said Maude; and, proceeding more frankly: "In fact that's all anyone talks about, isn't it, Elizabeth?" Elizabeth nodded without enthusiasm. "Gracious, there are some peculiar stories going around. I mean, on the way here we met Gus Ham and he said that colored woman Catherine

Crook (is that her name?) had been arrested for hitting Mrs Buster with a mason jar"

In sloping tones, Dolly said, "Catherine—had nothing to do with it"

"I guess someone did," said Maude "We saw Mrs. Buster in the post office this morning she was showing everybody a bump on her head, quite large It looked genuine to us, didn't it Elizabeth?" Elizabeth yawned. "To be sure. I don't

th

ha happened. We all will have a lot to be sorry for"

At last Maude took account of me "I've been wanting to see you, Collin," she said hurrying as though to hide an embarrassment mine, not hers "Elizabeth and I are planning a Halloween party, a real scary one and we thought it would be grand to dress you in a skeleton suit and sit you in a dark room to tell people's fortunes because you're so good at "

"Fibbing," said Elizabeth disinterestedly

"Which is what fortune telling is," Maude elaborated.

I don't know what gave them the idea I was such a story teller, unless it was at school I'd shown a superior talent for alibis I said it sounded fine, the party "But you better not count on me We might be in jail by then"

"Oh well, in that case" said Maude, as if accepting one of my old and usual excuses for not coming to her house

"Say Maude"

silence that had

rity I saw in th

on the radio"

As though dreaming aloud, she explained the

When we'd separated in the woods it was toward the sound of Catherine that he'd run This had brought him to the grass he'd been watch
had
wh
I d
soo
sides ... fellow jumped along double ... you too
of u
have
... made it possible for him to follow Catherine and the deputies into town They'd stuffed her into the rumble-seat of Big Eddie's old coupe and driven straight to the jail, Riley trailed them in his car "By the time we reached the jail she seemed to have got quieted down, there was a little crowd hanging around, kids some old farmers—you would have been proud of Catherine, she walked through them holding her dress together and her head like this" He tilted his head at a royal angle How often I'd seen Catherine do that, especially when anyone criticized her (for hiding puzzle pieces, spreading misinformation, not having her ... xed), and Dolly ...
ose "But,"
d she kick
ly four cells ... in the jail there are two for colored and two for white. Catherine had objected to being put in a colored people's cell.

The Judge stroked his chin, waved his head "You didn't get a chance to speak to her? She ought to have had the comfort of knowing one of us was there"

"I stood around hoping she'd come to the window. But then I heard the other news"

Thinking back, I don't see how Riley could have waited so long to tell us Because, my God our friend

When we'd separated in the woods it was toward
e sound of Catherine that he'd run This had
rought him to the
ad
hy
do you too
soon ... jumped along doubled over"
ides it occurred to
of us,
have s ... made it possible for him to follow Catherine and the deputies into town They'd stuffed her into the rumble seat of Big Eddie's old coupé and driven straight to the jail, Riley trailed them in his car "By the time we reached the jail she seemed to have got quieted down, there was a little crowd hanging around, kids, some old farmers--you would have been proud of Catherine, she walked through them holding her dress together and her head like this" He tilted his head at a royal angle. How often I'd seen Catherine do that, especially when anyone criticized her (for hiding puzzle pieces, spreading misinformation, not having her ... fixed), and Dolly
nose "But,"
jail she kicke ..." In the jail there are only four cells, two for colored and two for white. Catherine had objected to being put in a colored peoples cell

The Judge stroked his chin, waved his head "You didn't get a chance to speak to her? She ought to have had the comfort of knowing one of us was there"

"I stood around hoping she'd come to the window. But then I heard the other news"

Thinking back, I don't see how Riley could have waited so long to tell us Because, my God our friend

Five

THE FOLLOWING DAY, which was the first of October, a Wednesday, is one day I won't forget.

First off, Riley woke me by stepping on my fingers. Dolly, already awake, insisted I apologize for cursing him. Courtesy, she said, is more important in the morning than at any other time, particularly when one is living in such close quarters. The Judge's watch, still bending the twig like a heavy gold apple, gave the time as six after six. I don't know whose idea it was, but we breakfasted on oranges and animal crackers, and cold hotdogs. The Judge grouched that a body didn't feel human till he'd had a pot of hot coffee. We agreed that coffee was what we all most missed. Riley volunteered to drive into town and get some, also, he would have a chance to scout around, find out what was going on. He suggested I come with him. "Nobody's going to see him, not if he stays down in the seat." Although the Judge objected, saying he thought it foolhardy, Dolly could tell I wanted to go. I'd yearned so much for a ride in Riley's car that now the opportunit[illegible] nothin[illegible] could [illegible] said, "I can't [illegible] harm. But you ought to have a clean shirt. I could plant turnips in the collar of that one."

The field of grass was without voice, no pheasant rustle, furtive flurry, the pointed leaves were sharp

he wouldn't be more than an hour So stretching out on the seat, I listened to the chicanery of thieving sparrows in the livery stable s haystacks breathed the fresh bread, tart as currant odors escaping from the bakery The couple who owned this bakery, County was their name, Mr and Mrs C C County, had to begin their day at three in the morning to be ready by opening time, eight o'clock. It was a clean prosperous place Mrs County could afford the most expensive clothes at Verena s drygoods store. [illegible] lay there small [illegible] I the bakery [illegible] f swept flou [illegible] I guess he was surprised to see Riley s car, and surprised to find me in it.

"What you up to Collin?"

"Up to nothing Mr County," I said, and asked myself if he knew about our trouble

"Sure am happy October's here," he said, rubbing the air with his fingers as though the chill woven into it was a material he could feel. "We have a terrible time in the summer ovens and all make it too hot to live See here son, there s a gingerbread man waiting for you—come on in and run him down"

Now he was not the kind of man to get me in there and then call the Sheriff

His wife welcomed me into the spiced heat of the oven room as though she could think of nothing pleasanter than my being there Most anyone would have liked Mrs County A chunky woman with no fuss about her she had elephant ankles developed arms a muscular face permanently fire-flushed her eyes were like blue cake icing, her hair looked as if she d mopped it around in a flour barrel, and she wore an apron that trailed to the tips of her toes Her husband also wore one sometimes, with the fulsome

"I'm all for a boy serving his country But the part of it is, Samuel was just getting where he ld give us a hand around here I sure hate to de- d on nigger help Lying and stealing, never know ere you are"

It beats me

es better I've had occasion to say so to other peo- e in this town Like this business about old Cath-

o to the jail, for I'll wager the Sheriff doesn't set uch of a table"

So little once it has changed changes back the orld knew us we would never be warm again I let o saw winter coming toward a cold tree, cried, rried, came apart like a rain rotted rag I'd wanted to ance we left the house Mrs County begged pardon f she'd said anything to upset me, with her kitchen slopped apron she wiped my face and we laughed, had to at the mess it made, the paste of flour and tears and I felt, as they say, a lot better, kind of lighthearted For manly reasons I understood, but which made me feel no shame, Mr County had been mortified by the outburst he retired to the front of the shop

Mrs County poured coffee for herself and sat down "I don't pretend to follow what's going on," she said "The way I hear it, Miss Dolly broke housel

rem

men I saw the wagon Mrs County had spoken of—in reality an old truck contrived with tarpaulin covering to resemble the western wagons of history It looked forlorn and foolish standing alone in the empty square A homemade sign, perhaps four feet high crested the cab like a sharks fin Let Little Homer Honey Lasso Your So[illegible]

[illegible] ...ee, this was Child Wonder Little [illegible] out, Homer Honey With nothing more to see for there was no one around the truck, I took myself toward the jail which is a box shaped brick building next door to the Ford Motor Company I d been inside it once Big Eddie Stover had taken me there, along with a dozen other boys and men, he d walked into the drugstore and said come over to the jail if you want to see something The attraction was a thin handsome gipsy boy they d taken off a freight train, Big Eddie gave him a quarter and told him to let down his pants nobody could believe the size of it, and one of the men said "Boy, how come they keep you locked up when you got a crowbar like that?" For weeks you could tell girls who had heard that joke they giggled every time they passed the jail

There is an unusual emblem decorating a side wall of the jail I asked Dolly and she said that in her youth she remembers it as a candy advertisement If so the lettering has vanished, what remains is a chalky tapestry two flamingo pink trumpeting angels swinging swooping above a huge horn filled with fruit like a Christmas stocking embroidered on the brick it seems a faded mural, a faint tattoo and sun shine flutters the imprisoned angels as though they were the spirits of thieves I knew the risk I was tak-

thought to myself maybe at last Maude's had her bait of you

Riley's ragged hair was glued down with brilliantine, he smelled of lilac water and talcum He didn't have to tell me he'd been to the barber's, or why

Though he has since retired, there was in those days an exceptional fellow running the barbershop Amos Legrand Men like the Sheriff, for that matter Riley Henderson oh everybody come to think of it, said that old sis But they didn't mean any harm, most people enjoyed Amos and really wished him well A little monkeyman who had to stand on a box to cut your hair he was agitated and chattery as a pair of castanets All his steady customers he called honey, men and women alike, it made no difference to him "Honey," he'd say, "it's about time you got this hair cut was about to buy you a package of bobbypins" Amos had one tremendous gift He could tattle along on matters of true interest to businessmen and girls of ten—everything from what price Ben Jones [illegible]

[illegible] course he repeated it straight [illegible]

[illegible] you leave money lying around And of all people Verena Talbo here we thought she trotted to the bank with every dime came her way Twelve thousand seven hundred dollars But don't think it stops there Seems Verena and this Dr Ritz were going into business together that's why she bought the old canning factory Well get this she gave Ritz over ten thousand to buy machinery, mercy knows what and now it turns out he never bought one blessed penny's worth. Pocketed the whole thing

ing parading around in plain sight, but I walked past the jail, then back, and whistled, later whispered Catherine, Catherine, hoping this would bring her to the window I realized which was her window on the sill, reflecting beyond the bars, I saw a bowl of goldfish, the one thing, as subsequently we learned, she'd asked to have brought her Orange flickerings of the fish fanned around the coral castle, and I thought of the morning I'd helped Dolly find it, the castle, the pearl pebbles It had been the beginning and, chilled suddenly by a thought of what the end could be, Catherine coldly shadowed and peering downward, I prayed she would not come to the window she would have seen no one, for I turned and ran

Riley kept me waiting in the car more than two hours By the time he showed up he was himself in such a temper I didn't dare show any of my own It seems he'd gone home and found his sisters, Anne and Elizabeth and Maude Riordan, who had spent the night, still lolling abed not just that, but Coca Cola bottles and cigarette butts all over the parlor Maude took the blame she confessed to having invited some boys over to listen to the radio and dance, but it was the sisters who got punished He'd dragged them out of bed and whipped them I asked what did he mean, whipped them? Turned them over my knee, he said, and whipped them with a tennis shoe I couldn't picture this it conflicted with my sense of Elizabeth's dignity You're too hard on those girls I said, adding vindictively Maude, now there's the bad one He took me seriously, said yes he'd intended to whip her if only because she'd called him the kind of names he wouldn't take off anybody, but before he could catch her she'd bolted out the back door I

been the best part She leaned on the car door Her [illegible] the lashes weighed intol- [illegible] wettened her [illegible] " she said, and it was a dragging slow fuse voice I'd appreciate a few directions"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" said Riley, asserting himself "You nearly made us turn over"

"I'm surprised you mention it," said the woman, amiably tossing her large head, her hair, an invented apricot color, was meticulously curled, and the curls, shaken out, were like bells with no music in them "You were speeding dear," she reproved him complacently "I imagine there's a law against it, there are laws against everything, especially here"

Riley said "There should be a law against that truck A broken-down pile like that, it oughtn't to be allowed."

"I know dear" the woman laughed "Trade with you Though I'm afraid we couldn't all fit into this car, we're even a bit squeezed in the wagon Could [illegible]

Talbo Dolly Talbo She seems to be living in a tree I wish you'd kindly show us where "

Back of her there appeared to be an entire orphanage emptying out of the truck Babies barely able to toddle on [illegible]

As for him they've located not hide nor hair, South America that's where they'll find him when and if I never was somebody to insinuate any monkeyshines went on between him and her I said Verena Talbo's too particular honey that Jew had the worst case of dandruff I've ever seen on a human head But a smart woman like her maybe she *was* stuck on him Then all this to do with her sister the uproar over that I don't wonder Doc Carter's giving her shots But Charlie Cool's the one kills me what do you make of him out there catching his death?

We cleared town on two wheels pop pulp insects spit against the windshield The dry starched blue day whistled round us there was not a cloud And yet I swear storms foretell themselves in my bones This is a nuisance common to old people but fairly rare with anyone young It's as though a damp rumble of thunder had sounded in your joints The way I hurt I felt nothing less than a hurricane could be headed our way and said so to Riley who said go on you're crazy look at the sky We were making a bet about it when rounding that bad curve so convenient to the cemetery Riley winced and froze his brakes we skidded long enough for a detailed review of our lives

It was not Riley's fault square in the road and struggling along like a lame cow was the Little Homer Honey wagon With a clatter of collapsing machinery it came to a dead halt In a moment the driver climbed out a woman

She was not young but there was a merriness in the seesaw of her hips and her breasts rubbed and nudged against her peach colored blouse in such a coaxing way She wore a fringed chamois skirt and knee high cowboy boots which was a mistake for you felt that her legs, if fully exposed, would have

n the best part. She leaned on the car door. Her

v directions"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" said Riley, as-ting himself "You nearly made us turn over."

"I'm *surprised* you mention it," said the woman, iably tossing her large head, her hair, an invented pricot color, was meticulously curled, and the curls, aken out, were like bells with no music in them. You were speeding, dear," she reproved him com-lacently "I imagine there's a law against it; there re laws against everything, especially here"

Riley said, "There should be a law against that ruck A broken-down pile like that, it oughtn't to be llowed."

"I know, dear," the woman laughed "Trade with you. Though I'm afraid we couldn't all fit into this car, we're even a bit squeezed in the wagon Could you help me with a cigarette? That's a doll, thanks" As she lighted the cigarette I noticed how gaunt her hands were, rough, the nails were unpainted and one of them was black as though she'd crushed it in a door. "I was told that out this way we'd find a Miss Talbo Dolly Talbo She seems to be living in a tree. I wish you'd kindly show us where . "

Back of her there appeared to be an entire orphanage emptying out of the truck Babies barely able to toddle on their rickety bowlegs, towheads ... ropes of snot ... a ladder of bo... up to ten, this including a set of crosseyed twins and a diapered baby being lugged by a child not more than five Still, like a magician's rabbits, they kept

whistles "Bless you," said Little Homer, slipping the coin between his teeth and biting hard. "There's so much counterfeit going around these days," his mother confided apologetically. "In our branch of endeavor you wouldn't expect that kind of trouble," she said, sighing. "But if you kindly would show us—we can't go on much more, just haven't got the gas."

Riley told her she was wasting her time. "Nobody there any more," he said, racing the motor. Another driver, blockaded behind us, was honking his horn.

"Not in the tree?" Her voice was plaintive above the motor's impatient roar. "But where will we find her then?" Her hands were trying to hold back the car. "We've important business, we—"

Riley jumped the car forward. Looking back, I saw them watching after us in the raised and drifting road dust. I said to Riley, and was sullen about it, that we ought to have found out what they wanted.

And he said, "Maybe I know."

. . . It had ended in a real

scratches It made no difference that many bystanders had taken Sister Ida s side the Sheriff told them they d better be out of town by noon the next day Now after I'd heard all this I said to Riley why, when these people had been wrongly treated, hadn t he wanted to be more helpful? You d never guess the answer he gave me In dead earnest he said a loose woman like that was no one to associate with Dolly

A twig fire fizzed under the tree Riley collected

.

said dealing a game of Rook "really afraid Verena's seen the last of that money And you know Collin I doubt if it s losing the money that hurts her most For whatever reason she trusted him Dr Ritz, I mean I keep remembering Maudie Laura Murphy The girl who worked in the post office She and Verena were very close Lord it was a great blow when Maudie Laura took up with that whiskey salesman, married him I couldn t criticize her twas only fitting if she loved the man Just the same Maudie Laura and Dr Ritz, maybe those are the only two Verena ever trusted and both of them—well it could take the heart out of anyone " She thumbed the Rook cards with wandering attention "You said something be fore—about Catherine"

"About her goldfish I saw them in the window"

"But not Catherine?"

"No the goldfish, that s all Mrs County was an-

scolding me, I thought, for what she must have recognized as my resentment.

"But are you . . ?"

"I've never earned the privilege of making up my [illegible]

[illegible]

I would have invented someone, a story to retrieve her, for she seemed to be moving forward into the future, while I, unable to follow, was left with my sameness But as I described Sister Ida, the wagon, the children, told the wherefores of their run in with the Sheriff and how we'd met them on the road inquiring after the lady in the tree, we flowed together again like a stream that for an instant an island had separated. Though it would have been too bad if Riley had heard me betraying him, I went so far as to repeat what he'd said about a woman of Sister Ida's sort not being fit company for Dolly She had a proper laugh over this, then, with sudden soberness "But it's wicked—taking the bread out of children's mouths and using my name to do it Shame on them!" She straightened her hat determinedly "Collin, lift yourself You and I are going for a little walk. I'll bet those people are right where you left them Leastways, we'll see"

The Judge tried to prevent us, or at any rate maintained that if Dolly wanted a stroll he would have to [illegible]

[illegible] Dolly could not be hurried It was her habit, even when it rained to loiter along an ordinary

was sternly examining her shanks, "wish to see me? I'm Dolly Talbo"

[illegible] around [illegible] aid, as [illegible] could [illegible] you, Dolly [illegible]," she lifted the baby like a baton, "tell Dolly we never said a word against her!"

The children shook their heads, mumbled, and [illegible] could have a picture of them [illegible] as out of fashion [illegible] with her fruit [illegible] of cash, they took it all. I ought to have them arrested, that pale faced Buster and what's-his name, the Sheriff thinks he's King Kong." She caught her breath, her cheeks were like a raspberry patch. "The plain truth is, we're stranded Even if we'd ever heard of you, it's not our policy to speak ill of anyone Oh I know that was just the excuse but I figured you could straighten it out and "

"I'm hardly the *person*—dear me," said Dolly.

"But what would you do? with a half gallon of gas, *maybe not that*, fifteen mouths and a dollar ten? We'd be better off in jail"

Then "I have a friend," Dolly announced proudly, "a brilliant man, he'll know an answer," and I could tell by the pleased conviction of her voice that she believed this one hundred per cent. "Collin, you scoot ahead and let the Judge know to expect company for dinner"

Lickety-split across the field with the grass whipping my legs couldn't wait to see the Judge's face It was not a disappointment "Lordy-law!" he said,

the Judge with a hearty clap and a boastful nod towards the stew, promised he'd fix that soon enough In the meantime he thought it would be a good idea if the children went to the creek and washed their hands Sister Ida vowed they'd wash more than that They needed to I'll tell you

There was *trouble* with the little girl who wanted her name a *secret* she wouldn't go not unless her papa rode her piggyback You are too my papa" she told Riley who did not contradict her He lifted her onto his shoulders and she was tickled to death All the way to the creek she acted the cut up and when, with her hands thrust over his eyes Riley stumbled blindly into a bullis vine she ripped the air with in heaven shrieks He said he'd had enough of that and down you go Please I'll whisper you my name" Later on I remembered to ask him what the name had been It was Texaco Gasoline because those were such pretty words

the Judge, with a hearty clap and a boastful nod towards the stew, promised he'd fix that soon enough In the meantime he thought it would be a good idea if the children went to the creek and washed their hands Sister Ida vowed they'd wash more than that They needed to I'll tell you

There was trouble with the little girl who wanted her name a secret she wouldn't go not unless her

the way to the creek she acted the cut up and when, with her hands thrust over his eyes, Riley stumbled blindly into a bullis vine she ripped the air with m heaven shrieks He said he'd had enough of that d down you go "Please I'll whisper you my name" ter on I remembered to ask him what the name d been It was *Texaco Gasoline, because those* ere such pretty words

The creek is nowhere more than knee-deep, glossy eds of moss green the banks, and in the spring rows dewdrops and dwarf violets flourish there like oral crumbs for the new bees whose hives hang in he waterfalls Sister Ida chose a place on the bank rom which she could supervise the bathing "No letting now—I want to see a lot of commotion" We did Suddenly girls old enough to be married were trotting around and not a stitch on, boys, too, big and little all in there together naked as jaybirds It was as well that Dolly had stayed behind with the Judge and I wished Riley had not come either, for he was embarrassing in his embarrassment Seriously, though, it's only now, seeing the kind of man he turned out to be, that I understand the paradox of his primness he wanted so to be respectable that

the Judge, with a hearty clap and a boastful nod towards the stew promised he'd fix that soon enough. In the meantime he thought it would be a good idea if the children went to the creek and washed their hands Sister Ida vowed they'd wash more than that They needed to I'll tell you

There was trouble with the little girl who wanted her name a secret she wouldn't go not unless her [illegible]

[illegible] the way to the creek she acted the cut up and when with her hands thrust over his eyes Riley stumbled blindly into a bullis vine she ripped the air with in heaven shrieks He said he'd had enough of that and down you go "Please I'll whisper you my name" Later on I remembered to ask him what the name had been It was Texaco Gasoline because those were such pretty words

The creek is nowhere more than knee-deep glossy beds of moss green the banks and in the spring snowy dewdrops and dwarf violets flourish there like floral crumbs for the new bees whose hives hang in the waterbays. Sister Ida chose a place on the bank from which she could supervise the bathing "No cheating now—I want to see a lot of commotion" We did Suddenly girls old enough to be married were trotting around and not a stitch on boys too [illegible]

[illegible] Riley had not come either for he was embarrassing in his embarrassment Seriously, though, it's only now seeing the kind of man he turned out to be that I understand the paradox of his primness he wanted so to be respectable that

raring back, rocking forward, "Sixteen people," and, observing the meager stew simmering on the fire, struck his head For Riley's benefit I tried to make out it was none of my doing Dolly's meeting Sister Ida, but he just stood there skinning me with his eyes it could have led to bitter words if the Judge hadn t sent us scurrying He fanned up his fire, Riley fetched more water and into the stew we tossed sardines hotdogs green bay leaves in fact whatever lay at hand including an entire box of Saltines which the Judge claimed would help thicken it a few stuffs got mixed in by mistake—coffee grounds for instance Having reached that overwrought hilarious state achieved by cooks at family reunions we had the gall to stand back and congratulate ourselves. Riley gave me a forgiving comradely punch, and as the first of the children appeared the Judge scared them with the vigor of his welcome

None of them would advance until the whole herd had assembled Whereupon Dolly apprehensive as a woman exhibiting the results of an afternoon at an auction, brought them forward to be introduced The children made a rollcall of their names Beth Laurel, Sam, Lillie Ida Cleo Kate Homer Harry—here the melody broke because one small girl refused to give her name She said it was a secret Sister Ida agreed that if she thought it a secret, then so it should remain

"They're all so fretful" she said favorably affecting the Judge with her smoky voice and grasslike eyelashes He prolonged their handshake and overdid his smile, which struck me as peculiar conduct in a man who not three hours before had asked a woman to marry him, and I hoped that if Dolly noticed it would give her pause But she was saying Why certain they re fretful hungry as they can be and

the Judge, with a hearty clap and a boastful nod towards the stew, promised he'd fix that soon enough. In the meantime he thought it would be a good ... and washed ... sh more than

... who wanted ... ot unless her papa rode her piggyback. "You are too my papa," she told Riley, who did not contradict her. He lifted her onto his shoulders, and she was tickled to death. All the way to the creek she acted the cut-up, and when, with her hands thrust over his eyes, Riley stumbled blindly into a bullis vine, she ripped the air with in-heaven shrieks. He said he'd had enough of that and down you go. "Please. I'll whisper you my name." Later on I remembered to ask him what the name had been. It was Texaco Gasoline, because those were such pretty words.

The creek is nowhere more than knee-deep, glossy beds of moss green the banks, and in the spring snowy dewdrops and dwarf violets flourish there like floral crumbs for the new bees whose hives hang in the waterbays. Sister Ida chose a place on the bank from which she could supervise the bathing. "No cheating now—I want to see a lot of commotion." We did. Suddenly girls old enough to be married were trotting around and not a stitch on, boys, too, big and little all in there together naked as jaybirds. It was as well that Dolly had stayed behind with the Judge, and I wished Riley had not come either, for he was embarrassing in his embarrassment. Seriously, though, it's only now, seeing the kind of man he turned out to be, that I understand the paradox of his primness: he wanted so to be respectable that

her head to marry a man who'd run the place with papa. But where we were there wasn't much to choose from. Mama gave us our schooling, what of it we had, and the closest town was ten miles. That was the town of Youfry, called after a family, the slogan was You Won't Fry In Youfry, because it was up a mountain and well-to-do people went there in the summer. So the summer I'm thinking of Geraldine got waitress work at the Lookout Hotel in Youfry. I used to hitch a ride in on Saturdays and stay the night with her. This was the first either of us had ever been away from home. Geraldine didn't care about it particular, town life, but as for me I looked toward those Saturdays like each of them was Christmas and my birthday rolled into one. There was a dancing pavilion, it didn't cost a cent, the music was free and the colored lights. I'd help Geraldine with her work so we could go there all the sooner; we'd run hand in hand down the street, and I used to start dancing before I got my breath—never had to wait for a partner, there were five boys to every girl, and we were the prettiest girls anyway. I wasn't boy-crazy, especially; it was the dancing—sometimes everyone would stand still to watch me waltz, and I never got more than a glimpse of my partners, they changed so fast. Boys would follow us to the hotel, then call under our window: Come out! Come out! and sing so silly they were—Geraldine almost lost her job. Well, we'd lie awake considering the night in a practical way. She was not romantic, my sister; what concerned her was which of our beaux was surest to make things easier out home. It was Dan Rainey she decided on. He was older than the others, twenty-five, a man not handsome in the face, he had

[illegible] at the hotel they [illegible]

meat. I never went home the whole summer When the time came—it was such a day as this, a fall day blue as eternity—I didn't let them know I was coming, just got out of the coach and walked three miles through the wheat stacks till I found Dan Rainey. He didn't speak a word only plopped down and cried like a baby I was that sorry for him, and loved him more than tongue can tell"

Her cigarette had gone out. She seemed to have lost track of the story, or worse, thought better of finishing it. I wanted to stamp and whistle, the way rowdies do at the picture-show when the screen goes unexpectedly blank and Riley, though less bald about it, was impatient too He struck a match for her cigarette starting at the sound she remembered her voice again, but it was as if in the interval, she'd traveled far ahead

"So papa swore he'd shoot him A hundred times Geraldine said tell us who it was and Dan here'll take a gun after him I laughed till I cried, sometimes the other way round I said well I had no idea, there were five or six boys in Youfry could be the one, and how was I to know? Mama slapped my face when I said that But they believed it, even after a while I think Dan Rainey believed it—wanted to anyway poor unhappy fellow All those months not stirring out of the house and in the middle of it papa died They wouldn't let me go to the funeral, they were so ashamed for anyone to see It happened this day, with them off at the burial and me alone in the house and a sandy wind blowing rough as an elephant that I got in touch with God I didn't by any means deserve to be Chosen up till then, mama'd

be a twin to Danny But I was wrong to think it could have the *same* father It would've been a dead child, born dead· I looked at Dan Rainey (it was the coldest day, we sat by the empty dancing pavilion, I remember he never took his hands out of his pockets) and sent him away without saying why it was I'd asked him to come Then years spent hunting the likeness of him One of the miners in Stoneville, he had the same freckles yellow eyes, a goodhearted boy, he obliged me with Sam, my oldest. As best I recall, Beth's father was a dead ringer for Dan Rainey, but being a girl, Beth didn't favor Danny. I forgot to tell you that I'd sold my share of the laundry and gone to Texas—had restaurant work in Amarillo and Dallas But it wasn't until I met Mr Honey that I saw why the Lord had chosen me and what my task was to be Mr Honey possessed the True Word after I heard him preach that first time I went round to see him we hadn't talked twenty minutes than he said I'm going to marry you provided you're not married already I said no I'm not married, but I've got some family fact is there was five by then. Didn't faze him a bit We got married a week [illegible] Day He wasn't a young man, of his [illegible] stripped but when the Lord brought [illegible] shoulder, certain what He was doing we had Roy then Pearl and Kate and Cleo and Little Homer—most of them born in that wagon you saw up there We traveled all over the country carrying His Word to folks who'd never heard it before not the way my man could tell it Now I must mention a sad circumstance, which is I lost Mr Honey One morning this was in a queer part of Louisiana, Cajun parts, he walked off down the road to buy some groceries you know we

had to coax me to learn my Bible verses; afterwards, I memorized over a thousand in less than three months Well I was practicing a tune on the piano, and suddenly a window broke, the whole room turned topsyturvy, then fell together again, and someone was with me, papa's spirit I thought, but the wind died down peaceful as spring—He was there, and standing as He made me straight, I opened my arms to welcome Him That was twenty-six years ago last February the third I was sixteen, I'm forty-two now and I've never wavered When I had my baby I didn't call Geraldine or Dan Ramey or anybody, only lay there whispering my verses one after the other and not a soul knew Danny was born till they heard him holler It was Geraldine named him that He was hers everyone thought so and people round the countryside rode over to see her new baby, brought presents, some of them, and the men hit Dan Ramey on the back and told him what a fine son he had Soon as I was able I moved thirty miles away to Stoneville that's a town double the size of Youfry and where they have a big mining camp Another girl and I we started a laundry, and did a good business on account of in a mining town there's mostly bachelors About twice a month I went home to see Danny, I was seven years going back and forth, it was the only pleasure I had and a strange one, considering how it tore me up every time such a beautiful boy, there's no describing But Geraldine died for me to touch him if I kissed him she'd come near to jumping out of her skin Dan Ramey wasn't much different, he was so scared I wouldn't leave well enough alone The last time I ever was home I asked him would he meet me in Youfry Because for a crazy long while I'd had an idea which was if I could live it again, if I could bear a child that would

The croonings of a ringdove wavered among the

"And it's getting late," said Sister Ida "Buck, Homer—you boys chase up to the wagon Gracious knows who's come along and helped themselves Not," she added, watching her sons vanish on the darkening path, "that there's a whole lot to take, nothing much except my sewing machine So, Dolly? Have you

"We've discussed it," said Dolly turning to the Judge for confirmation

"You'd win your case in court no question of it," he said, very professional "For once the law would be on the right side As matters stand, however . . ."

Dolly said, "As matters stand," and pressed into Sister Ida's hand the forty seven dollars which constituted our cash asset in addition, she gave her the Judge's big gold watch Contemplating these gifts,

burst upon the path like charging cavalry "They're coming! They're coming!" both got out at once, and Little Homer pushing back his hat, gasped "We ran all the way"

"Make sense boy who?"

Little Homer swallowed "Those fellows The Sheriff one and I don't know how many more Coming down through the grass With guns too"

Thunder rumbled again, tricks of wind rustled our fire

Six

Five of us roosted in the sycamore tree that overhung the path. Little Homer was there and his brother Buck, a scowling boy with rocks in either hand. Across the way straddling the limbs of a second sycamore, we could see Riley surrounded by the older girls in the deepening burnished light their white faces glimmered like candle lanterns. I thought I felt a raindrop it was a bead of sweat slipping along my cheek. Still and though the thunder lulled a smell of rain intensified the odor of leaves and woodsmoke. The overloaded tree house, gave an evil creak, from my vantage point its tenants seemed a single creature, a many legged many-eyed spider upon whose head Dolly's hat sat perched like a velvet crown.

In our tree everybody pulled out the kind of tin whistles Riley had bought from Little Homer good to give the devil a scare Sister Ida had said. Then Little Homer took off his huge hat and, removing from its vast interior what was perhaps God's Via lifeline a thick long rope at any rate proceeded to make a sliding noose. As he tested its efficiency stretched and tightened the knot his steely miniature spectacles cast such a menacing sparkle that, edging away I put the distance of another branch between us. The Judge patrolling below hissed to stop moving around up there it was his last order before the invasion began.

The invaders themselves made no pretense at

Six

Five of us roosted in the sycamore tree that overhung the path Little Homer was there, and his brother Buck, a scowling boy with rocks in either hand Across the way, straddling the limbs of a second sycamore, we could see Riley surrounded by the older girls in the deepening burnished light their white [illegible]

of rain intensified the odor of leaves and woodsmoke The overloaded tree house, gave an evil creak, from my vantage point, its tenants seemed a single creature, a many legged many-eyed spider upon whose head Dolly's hat sat perched like a velvet crown

In our tree everybody pulled out the kind of tin whistles Riley had bought from Little Homer good to give the devil a scare Sister Ida had said Then Little Homer took off his huge hat and, removing from its vast interior what was perhaps God's Washline a thick long rope at any rate proceeded to make a sliding noose As he tested its efficiency, stretched and tightened the knot his steely miniature spectacles cast such a menacing sparkle that, edging away I put the distance of another branch between us The Judge patrolling below, hissed to stop moving around up there it was his last order before the invasion began

The invaders themselves made no pretense at

stealth Swinging their rifles against the undergrowth like canecutters, they swaggered up the path, *nine, twelve, twenty strong* First, Junius Candle, his Sheriff's star winking in the dusk, and after him Big Eddie Stover, whose squint eyed search of our hiding places reminded me of those newspaper picture puzzles *find five boys and an owl in this drawing of a tree* It requires someone cleverer than Big Eddie Stover He looked straight at me, and through me. Not many of that gang would have troubled you with their braininess good for nothing but a lick of salt and swallow of beer most of them Except I recognized Mr Hand, the principal at school a decent enough fellow taken all around, no one, you would have thought, to involve himself in such shabby company on so shameful an errand Curiosity explained the attendance of Amos Legrand, he was there, and silent for once no wonder as though he were a walking stick Verena was leaning a hand on his head which came not quite to her hip A grim Reverend Buster ceremoniously supported her other arm When I saw Verena I felt a numbed reliving of the terror I d known when, after my mother s death she'd come to our house to claim me Despite what seemed a lameness, she moved with her customary tall authority and, accompanied by her escorts, stopped under our sycamore

The Judge didn t give an inch toe to toe with the Sheriff, he stood his ground as if there were a drawn line he dared the other to cross

It was at this crucial moment that I noticed Little Homer He gradually was lowering his lasso It crawled, dangled like a snake, the wide noose open as a pair of jaws then fell with an expert snap, around the neck of the Reverend Buster, whose

mgling outcry Little Homer stuffed by giving the pe a mighty tug

His friends hadn't long to consider old Buster's ed.cament his blood gorged face and flailing arms, r Little Homer's success inspired an all-out attack cks fiew, whistles shrilled like the shriekings of vage birds and the men, pummeling each other i the general rout took refuge where they could, rncipally under the bodies of comrades already allen Verena had to box Amos Legrand s ears he ned to sneak up under her skirt She alone you might say behaved like a real man shook her fists it the trees and cursed us blue

At the height of the din, a shot slammed like an iron door It quelled us all, the serious endless echo of it but in the hush that followed we heard a weight come crashing through the opposite sycamore

It was Riley falling and falling slowly relaxed as a killed cat Covering their eyes the girls screamed as he struck a branch and splintered it, hovered like the torn leaves then in a bleeding heap hit the ground No one moved toward him

Until at last the Judge said "Boy my boy" and in a trance sank to his knees he caressed Riley s limp hands "Have mercy Have mercy son answer" Other men, sheepish and frightened closed round some offered advice which the Judge seemed unable to comprehend One by one we dropped down from the trees and the children s gathering whisper is he dead? is he dead? was like the moan, the delicate roar of a sea trumpet Doffing their hats respectfully, the men made an aisle for Dolly she was too stunned to take account of them, or of Verena whom she passed without seeing

"I want to know" said Verena in tones that sum

n, Dolly We'll have such good times I'll give you my sparkle belt." And Texaco Gasoline threw herself upon the Judge, pleading for him to go with them, too Nobody seemed to want me

"I'll always remember that you asked me," said Dolly, her eyes hurrying as though to memorize the childrens faces "Good luck Good bye Run now," she raised her voice above new and nearer thunder, "run, its raining"

It was a tickling feathery rain fine as a gauze curtain, and as they faded into the folds of it, Sister Ida and her family Verena said "Do I understand you've been conniving with that—woman? After she made a mockery of our name?"

[illegible]

any [illegible]

wit [illegible]

children and drag old women into jail I cant set much store by a name that endorses such methods

[illegible] not

"You'd best look again I am myself Dolly seemed to pose for inspection She was as tall as Verena, as assured nothing about her was incomplete or blurred "I've taken your advice stopped hanging my head I mean You told me it made you dizzy And not many days ago" she continued, "you told me that you were ashamed of me Of Catherine So much of our lives had been lived for you it was painful to realize the waste that had been Can you know what it is such a feeling of waste?"

Scarcely audible Verena said, "I do know" and it was as if her eyes crossed peered inward upon a stony vista It was the expression I'd seen when spying from the attic I'd watched her late at night

...gh believed to assert. She found it unforgivable. ...ou don't remember, do you, Charlie Cool? Fifty ...rs ago more maybe Some of you boys came ...ckberry stealing out at our place My father caught ...ur cousin Seth, and I caught you. It was quite a ...king you got that day."

The Judge d... [illegible]

[illegible]

...Charl... [illegible]

[illegible]

...o leave us, it can be no further affair of yours"

"But it is," said Dolly "Because Judge Cool, Charlie . ." she dwindled, appeared for the first time to question her boldness

"Dolly means that I have asked her to marry me."

"That," Verena managed after some suspenseful seconds, "is," she said, regarding her gloved hands, "remarkable Very I wouldn't have credited either of you with so much imagination Or is it that I am imagining? Quite likely I'm dreaming of myself in a wet tree on a thundery night Except I never have dreams, or perhaps I only forget them. This one I suggest we all forget."

"I'll own up I think it is a dream Miss Verena. But a man who doesn't dream is like a man who doesn't sweat he stores up a lot of poison"

She ignored him her attention was with Dolly, Dolly's with her they might have been alone together two persons at far ends of a bleak room, mutes communicating in an eccentric sign language, subtle shiftings of the eye it was as though, then, Dolly gave an answer one that sapped all color from

ough believed to assert She found it unforgivable. You dont remember do you Charlie Cool? Fifty years ago more maybe Some of you boys came blackberry stealing out at our place My father caught your cousin Seth, and I caught you It was quite a

to leave us it can be no further affair of yours"

But it is" said Dolly "Because Judge Cool Charlie " she dwindled appeared for the first time to question her boldness

"Dolly means that I have asked her to marry me"

"That," Verena managed after some suspenseful seconds, "is" she said regarding her gloved hands "remarkable Very I wouldn't have credited either of you with so much imagination. Or is it that I am imagining? Quite likely I'm dreaming of myself in a wet tree on a thundery night Except I never have dreams or perhaps I only forget them This one I suggest we all forget."

"I'll own up I think it is a dream Miss Verena But a man who doe n t dream is like a man who doesn t sweat he stores up a lot of poison"

She ignored him her attention was with Dolly, Dolly s with her they might have been alone together

comm

shiftin

Dolly gave an answer one that sapped all color from

brooding over the Kodak pictures of Maudie Laura Murphy, Maudie Laura's husband and children. She swayed, she put a hand on my shoulder, except for that, I think she might have fallen.

"I imagined I would go to my dying day with the hurt of it. I won't. But it's no satisfaction, Verena, to say that I'm ashamed of you, too."

It was night now; frogs, sawing insects celebrated the slow-falling rain. We dimmed as though the wetness had snuffed the light of our faces. Verena sagged against me. "I'm not well," she said in a skeleton voice. "I'm a sick woman, I am, Dolly."

Somewhat unconvinced, Dolly approached Verena, presently touched her, as though her fingers could sense the truth. "Collin," she said, "Judge, please help me with her into the tree." Verena protested that she couldn't go climbing trees, but once she got used to the idea she went up easily enough. The raftlike tree-house seemed to be floating over shrouded vaporish waters; it was dry there, however, for the mild rain had not penetrated the parasol of leaves. We drifted in a current of silence until Verena said: "I have something to say, Dolly. I could say it more easily if we were alone."

The Judge crossed his arms. "I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me, Miss Verena." He was emphatic, though not belligerent. "I have an interest in the outcome of what you might have to say."

"I doubt that. However," she said, recovering to a degree her exalted manner.

He lighted a stub of candle, and our sudden shadows stooped over us like four eavesdroppers. "I don't like talking in the dark," he said. There was a purpose in the proud erectness of his posture: it was, I thought, to let Verena know she was dealing with a man, a fact too few men in her experience had

once if at all, and nothing more happens to them. They live but they've had their life"

"Not you" he said, and brought his face nearer hers as though he meant their lips to touch yet wavered not daring it Rain had tunneled through the branches it fell full weight rivulets of it streamed off Dolly's hat, the veiling clung to her cheeks with a flutter the candle failed. "Not me"

Successive strokes of lightning throbbed like veins of fire, and Verena, illuminated in that sustained glare was not anyone I knew but some woman woebegone wasted—with eyes once more drawn toward each other their stare settled on an inner ter ri ory a withered country as the lightning lessened, as the hum of rain sealed us in its multiple sounds, she spoke and her voice came so weakly from so very far not expecting, it seemed to be heard at all. Envied you Dolly Your pink room I've only knocked at the doors of such rooms not often—enough to know that now there is no one but you to let me in Because little Morris little Morris—help me I loved him I did Not in a womanly way it was oh I admit it, that we were kindred spirits We looked each other in the eye we saw the same devil, we weren't afraid it was—merry But he outsmarted me I'd known he could, and hoped he wouldn't and he did and now it's too long to be alone a lifetime I walk through the house, nothing is mine your pink room your kitchen the house is yours and Catherine's too I think Only don't leave me let me live with you I'm feeling old, I want my sister"

The rain adding its voice to Verena's was between them Dolly and the Judge a transparent wall through which he could watch her losing substance recede before him as earlier she had seemed to recede

Seven

FOR QUITE A WHILE it was Catherine's custom to date [illegible] after Lee incar- [illegible] e That could have divided history along similar lines, [illegible] us, we in terms of before and after the tree house Those few autumn days were a monument and a signpost.

Except to collect his belongings, the Judge never again entered the house he'd shared with his sons and their wives a circumstance that must have suited them, at least they made no protest when he took a room at Miss Bell's boarding house This was a brown solemn establishment which lately has been turned into a funeral home by an undertaker who saw that to effect the correct atmosphere a minimum of renovation would be necessary I disliked going past it, for Miss Bell's guests ladies thorny as the blighted rosebushes littering the yard occupied the porch in a dawn to-dark marathon of vigilance One of them the twice widowed Mamie Canfield, specialized in spotting pregnancies (some legendary fellow is supposed to have told his wife Why waste money on a doctor? just trot yourself past Miss Bell's Mamie Canfield she'll let the world know soon enough whether you is or ain't) Until the Judge moved there Amos Legrand was the only man in residence at Miss Bell's He was a godsend to the other tenants the moments most sacred to them were

before me. More than that, it was as if the tree-house were dissolving. Lunging wind cast overboard the soggy wreckage of our Rook cards, our wrapping papers; animal crackers crumbled, the rain-filled mason jars spilled over like fountains; and Catherine's beautiful scrapquilt was ruined, a puddle. It was going: like the doomed houses rivers in flood float away; and it was as though the Judge were trapped there—waving to us as we, the survivors, stood ashore. For Dolly had said, "Forgive me, I want my sister, too," and the Judge could not reach her, not with his arms, not with his heart: Verena's claim was too final.

Somewhere near midnight the rain slackened, halted, wind barreled about wringing out the trees. Singly, like delayed guests arriving at a dance, appearing stars pierced the sky. It was time to leave. We took nothing with us: left the quilt to rot, spoons to rust, and the tree-house, the woods we left to winter.

Seven

FOR QUITE A WHILE it was Catherine's custom to date events as having occurred before or after her incarceration "Prior" she would begin "to the time That One made a jailbird of me" As for the rest of us we could have divided history along similar lines, that is, in terms of before and after the tree house Those few autumn days were a monument and a signpost.

Except to collect his belongings the Judge never again entered the house he d shared with his sons and their wives a circumstance that must have suited them at least they made no protest when he took a room at Miss Bell s boarding house This was a brown solemn establishment which lately has been turned into a funeral home by an undertaker who saw that to effect the correct atmosphere a minimum of renovation would be necessary I disliked going past it, for Miss Bell s guests ladies thorny as the blighted rosebushes littering the yard occupied the porch in a dawn to-dark marathon of vigilance One of them the twice widowed Mamie Canfield, specialized in spotting pregnancies (some legendary fel low is supposed to have told his wife Why waste money on a doctor? just trot yourself past Miss Bell s Mamie Canfield she'll let the world know soon enough whether you is or aint) Until the Judge moved there Amos Legrand was the only man in residence at Miss Bell s He was a godsend to the other tenants the moments most sacred to them were

thing new I've never heard of it But I do feel as though I were skylarking along on a pair of stilts. Lovely" she said and fell asleep

For three nearly four days she never really woke up Catherine stayed with her dozing upright in a wicker chair and growling low whenever Verena or I tiptoed into the room She persisted in fanning Dolly with a picture of Jesus as though it were summertime and it was a disgrace how she ignored Doctor Carter's instructions "I wouldn't feed th t to a hog," she'd declare pointing to some medicine he'd sent around Finally Doctor Carter said he wouldn't be responsible unless the patient were removed to a hospital The nearest hospital was in Brewton sixty miles away Verena sent over there for an ambulance She could have saved herself the expense because Catherine locked Dolly's door from the inside and said the first one to rattle the knob would need an ambulance themselves Dolly did not know where they wanted to take her wherever it was she begged not to go "Don't wake me" she said "I don't want to see the ocean"

Toward the end of the week she could sit up in bed a few days later she was strong enough to resume correspondence with her dropsy-cure customers She was worried by the unfilled orders that had piled up but Catherine who took the credit for Dolly's improvement, said, "Shoot, it's no time we'll be out there boiling a brew"

Every afternoon, promptly at four the Judge presented himself at the garden gate and whistled for me to let him in by using the garden gate rather than the front door he lessened the chance of encountering Verena—not that she objected to his coming indeed she was ly supplied for his visits a bottle of sherry and a box of cigars Usually he brought

games "Please don't," Dolly admonished the Judge when he attempted to explain the rules of this game. "I like a mystery Everybody shouting, having such a fine time it might not sound so large and happy if I knew why" Primarily the Judge was peeved because he couldn't get Dolly to root for any one team She thought both sides should win "They're all nice boys, I'm sure"

Because of the radio Catherine and I had words one afternoon It was the afternoon Maude Riordan was playing in a broadcast of the state musical competition Naturally I wanted to hear her, Catherine knew that, but she was tuned in on a Tulane Georgia Tech game and wouldn't let me near the radio I said, "What's come over you, Catherine? Selfish dissatisfied, always got to have your own way, why you're worse than Verena ever was" It was as though, in lieu of prestige lost through her encounter with the law, she'd had to double her power in the Talbo house we at least would have to respect her Indian blood, accept her tyranny Dolly was willing, in the matter of Maude R ordan [illegible] me" [illegible] tian n [illegible]

Ev [illegible] should [illegible] won first prize She placed second, which pleased her family for it meant a half scholarship in music at the University Still it wasn't fair, because she performed beautifully much better than the boy who won the larger prize She played her father's serenade and it seemed to me as pretty as it had that day in the woods Since that day I'd wasted hours scribbling her name describing in my head her charms her hair the color of vanilla ice cream The Judge arrived in time to hear the broadcast and I know Dolly was glad because it was as if we were

games. "Please don't," Dolly admonished the Judge when he attempted to explain the rules of this game. "I like a mystery. Everybody shouting, having such a fine time: it might not sound so large and happy if I knew why." Primarily the Judge was peeved because he couldn't get Dolly to root for any one team. She thought both sides should win. "They're all nice boys, I'm sure."

Because of the radio Catherine and I had words one afternoon. It was the afternoon Maude Riordan was playing in a broadcast of the state musical competition. Naturally I wanted to hear her, Catherine [illegible]

fied, always got to have your own way, why you're worse than Verena ever was." It was as though, in lieu of prestige lost through her encounter with the law, she'd had to double her power in the Talbo house: we at least would have to respect her Indian blood, accept her tyranny. Dolly was willing; in the matter of Maude Riordan however, she sided with me. "Let Collin find his station. It wouldn't be Christian not to listen to Maude. She's a friend of ours."

Everyone who heard Maude agreed that she should've won first prize. She placed second, which pleased her family, for it meant a half scholarship in music at the University. Still it wasn't fair, because she performed beautifully, much better than the boy who won the larger prize. She played her father's serenade, and it seemed to me as pretty as it had that day in the woods. Since that day I'd wasted hours scribbling her name, describing in my head her charms: her hair the color of vanilla ice cream. The Judge arrived in time to hear the broadcast, and I know Dolly was glad because it was as if we were

casually nailed together a place stray animals would have claimed if Riley had not been a gifted carpenter He had an outdoor shed a combination of workshop and sanctuary, where he spent his mornings sawing lumber shaving shingles Its wall shelves [illegible] snakes

dermy had resulted in a pitiful zoo of nasty odored beasts an eyeless rabbit with maggot green fur and ears that drooped like a bloodhound's—objects better off buried. I'd been lately to see Riley several times, Big Eddie Stover's bullet had shattered his shoulder and the curse of it was he had to wear an itching plaster cast which weighed he said a hundred pounds Since he couldn't drive his car or hammer a proper nail, there wasn't much for him to do except loaf around and brood

"If you want to see Riley " said Elizabeth "you'll find him out in the shed I expect Maude's with him "

"Maude Riordan?" I had reason to be surprised because on the occasions I'd visited Riley he'd made a point of our sitting in the shed the girls wouldn't bother us there for it was he'd boasted one threshold no female was permitted to cross

"Reading to him Poetry plays Maude's been absolutely adorable And it's not as though my brother had ever treated her with common human decency But she's let bygones be bygones I guess coming so near to being killed the way he was I guess that would change a person—make them more receptive to the finer things He lets her read to him by the hour"

The shed shaded by fig trees was in the back yard Matronly Plymouth hens waddled about its doorstep pecking at the seeds of last summer's fallen

Elizabeth said, "You didn't stay long Or weren't [illegible] there?"

[illegible] "They [illegible]"

[illegible] was, despite the subtleties her soulful appearance promised, too literal a person "Wonderful, isn't it?"

"Wonderful"

"Collin—for heaven's sake what are you sniveling about?"

"Nothing I mean I've got a cold"

"Well I *hope* it doesn't keep you away *from the* party Only you must have a costume Riley's coming as the devil."

"That's appropriate"

"Of course we want you in a skeleton suit I know there's only a day left [illegible]"

I had no intention of going to the party As soon as I got home I sat down to write Riley a letter Dear Riley Dear Henderson I crossed out the dear plain Henderson would do Henderson your treachery has not gone unobserved Pages were filled recording the origins of our friendship its honorable history and gradually a feeling grew that there must be a mistake such a splendid friend would not have wronged me Until toward the end I found myself deliriously telling him he was my best friend my brother So I threw these ravings in a fireplace and five minutes later was in Dolly's room asking what were the chances of my having a skeleton suit made by the following night

Dolly was not much of a seamstress she had her difficulties hitting a hemline This was also true of Catherine it was in Catherine's makeup however, to pretend professional status in all fields particularly [illegible] was least competent She sent me

sunflowers. On the door a childhood word in faded whitewash feebly warned Beware! It aroused a shyness in me. Beyond the door I could hear Maude's voice—her poetry voice, a swooning chant certain louts in school had dearly loved to mimic. Anyone who'd been told Riley Henderson had come to this, they'd have said that fall from the sycamore had affected his head. Stealing over to the shed's window, I got a look at him: he was absorbed in sorting the insides of a clock and, to judge from his face, might have been listening to nothing more uplifting than the hum of a fly; he jiggled a finger in his ear, as though to relieve an irritation. Then, at the moment I'd decided to startle them by rapping on the window, he put aside his clockworks and, coming round behind Maude, reached down and shut the book from which she was reading. With a grin he gathered in his hand twists of her hair—she rose like a kitten lifted by the nape of its neck. It was as though they were edged with light, some brilliance that smarted my eyes. You could see it wasn't the first time they'd kissed.

Not one week before, because of his experience in such matters, I'd taken Riley into my confidence, confessed to him my feelings for Maude: please look, I wished I were a giant so that I could grab hold of that shed and shake it to a splinter, knock down the door and denounce them both. Yet—of what could I accuse Maude? Regardless of how bad she'd talked about him I'd always known she was heartset on Riley. It wasn't as if there had ever been an understanding between the two of us: at the most we'd been good friends, for the last few years not even that. As I walked back through the yard the pompous Plymouth hens cackled after me tauntingly.

Elizabeth said, "You didn't stay long Or weren't they there?"

[illegible] "They [illegible]

[illegible] e was, despite the subtleties her soulful appearance promised, too literal a person. "Wonderful isn't it?"

"Wonderful"

"Collin—for heaven's sake what are you sniveling about?"

"Nothing I mean I've got a cold"

"Well I hope it doesn't keep you away from the party Only you must have a costume Riley's coming as the devil"

"That's appropriate"

"Of course we want you in a skeleton suit I know there's only a day left [illegible]"

I had no intention of going to the party As soon as I got home I sat down to write Riley a letter Dear Riley Dear Henderson I crossed out the dear, plain Henderson would do Henderson your [illegible]

[illegible] until, toward the end I found myself deliriously telling him he was my best friend, my brother So I threw these ravings in a fireplace and five minutes later was in Dolly's room asking what were the chances of my having a skeleton suit made by the following night

Dolly was not [illegible]

difficulties [illegible]

Catherine, [illegible]

[illegible]

sunflowers. On the door a childhood word in faded whitewash feebly warned Beware! It aroused a shyness in me. Beyond the door I could hear Maude's voice—her poetry voice, a swooning chant certain louts in school had dearly loved to mimic. Anyone who'd been told Riley Henderson had come to this, they'd have said that fall from the sycamore had affected his head. Stealing over to the shed's window I got a look at him: he was absorbed in sorting the insides of a clock and, to judge from his face, might have been listening to nothing more uplifting than the hum of a fly; he jiggled a finger in his ear as though to relieve an irritation. Then, at the moment I'd decided to startle them by rapping on the window, he put aside his clockworks and, coming round behind Maude, reached down and shut the book from which she was reading. With a grin he gathered in his hand twists of her hair—she rose like a kitten lifted by the nape of its neck. It was as though they were edged with light, some brilliance that smarted my eyes. You could see it wasn't the first time they'd kissed.

Not one week before, because of his experience in such matters, I'd taken Riley into my confidence, confessed to him my feelings for Maude: please look. I wished I were a giant so that I could grab hold of that shed and shake it to a splinter, knock down the door and denounce them both. Yet—of what could I accuse Maude? Regardless of how bad she'd talked about him, I'd always known she was heartset on Riley. It wasn't as if there had ever been an understanding between the two of us; at the most we'd been good friends; for the last few years not even that. As I walked back through the yard the pompous Plymouth hens cackled after me tauntingly.

women Old women and their prejudices But it was done, and somehow I m not worried about it no v you'll make your mark, you'll get on It s this that I want you to promise me don t be unkind to Catherine, try not to grow too far away from her Some nights it keeps me wide awake to think of her forsaken. There" she held up my suit, "let s see if it fits"

It pinched in the crotch and in the rear drooped like an old mans B V D s the legs were wide as s lo pant one sloe a stemmel be m

some once to dress up a flagpole--before she took against the government It should be somewhere in the attic that little can Look under the bed and see if you can locate my slippers"

She was forbidden to get up not even Catherine would permit that. "It won t be any fun if you scold," she said and found the slippers herself The courthouse clock had chimed eleven which meant it was ten thirty a dark hour in a town he

doors

the ne

to bec

t ate ed while we searched wherever we put our hands it caused a huffy scuttling of fragile feet Over turned a carton of mothballs clattered on the floor "Oh, dear oh, dear" cried Dolly giggling, "if Veren. hears that sl e ll call the Sheriff"

We unearthed numberless brushes the paint, dis covered ben ath a welter of dried holiday wreath

to Verena's drygoods store for seven yards of their choicest black satin. "With seven yards there ought to be some bits left over: me and Dolly can trim our petticoats." Then she made a show of tape-measuring my lengths and widths, which was sound procedure except that she had no idea of how to apply such information to scissors and cloth. "This little piece," she said, hacking off a yard, "it'd make somebody lovely bloomers. And this here — snip snip — a black satin collar would dress up my old print considerable." You couldn't have covered a midget's shame with the amount of material allotted me.

"Catherine, now dear, we mustn't think of our own needs," Dolly warned her.

They worked without recess through the afternoon. The Judge, during his usual visit, was forced to thread needles, a job Catherine despised: "Makes my flesh crawl, like stuffing worms on a fishhook." At suppertime she called quits and went home to her house among the butter-bean stalks.

But a desire to finish had seized Dolly, and a talkative exhilaration. Her needle sounded in and out of the satin like the seams it made: her sentences linked in a wiggling line. "Do you think," she said, "that Verena would let me give a party? Now that I have so many friends? There's Riley, there's Charlie, couldn't we ask Mrs. County, Maude and Elizabeth? In the spring, a garden party — with a few fireworks. My father was a great hand for giving a party. I didn't inherit it from him. Some fireworks he used in the old days: there was a friend of Papa's that won I don't know how many prizes for his scrapquilts. Papa said it relaxed him after the heavy rough work around a farm. Collin. Will you promise me something? I was against your coming here. I've never believed it was right, raising a [illegible]

women Old women and their prejudices But it was done and somehow I'm not worried about it now you'll make your mark, you'll get on. It's this that I want you to promise me don't be unkind to Catherine, try not to grow too far away from her Some nights it keeps me wide awake to think of her forsaken. There" she held up my suit, "let's see if it fits"

It pinched in the crotch and in the rear drooped like an old man's B V D s the legs were wide as [illegible]

[illegible]

bones [illegible] she said "Silver paint Verena bought some once to dress up a flagpole—before she took against the government It should be somewhere in the attic that little can Look under the bed and see if you can locate my slippers"

She was forbidden to get up not even Catherine would permit that "It won't be any fun if you scold," she said and found the slippers herself The courthouse clock had chimed eleven which meant it was ten thirty a dark hour in a town where respectable doors are locked at nine it seemed later still because in the next room Verena had closed her ledgers and gone to bed We took an oil lamp from the linen closet and by its tottering light tiptoed up the ladder into the attic It was cold up there we set the lamp on a barrel and lingered near it as though it were a hearth. Saw dust heads that once had helped sell St Louis hats watched while we searched wherever we put our hands it caused a huffy scuttling of fragile feet Over turned a carton of mothballs clattered on the floor "Oh dear oh dear" cried Dolly giggling, "if Verena hears that she'll call the Sheriff"

We unearthed numberless brushes the paint dis covered beneath a welter of dried holiday wreaths,

trapped inside the suit, a fine fix for which I blamed her with a pointing finger.

"You have to whirl," she teased. "Whirling will dry you." She blissfully extended her arms and turned in slow ungainly circles across the shadows of the attic floor, her plain kimono billowing and her thin feet wobbling in their slippers. It was as though she had collided with another dancer: she stumbled, a hand on her forehead, a hand on her heart.

Far on the horizon of sound a train whistle howled, and it wakened me to the bewilderment puckering her eyes, the contractions shaking her face. With my arms around her, and the paint bleeding its pattern against her, I called Verena, somebody help me!

Dolly whispered, "Hush now, hush."

Houses at night announce catastrophe by their sudden pitiable radiance. Catherine dragged from room to room switching on lights unused for years. Shivering inside my wrecked costume, I sat in the glare of the entrance hall sharing a bench with the Judge. He had come at once, wearing only a raincoat slung over a flannel nightshirt. Whenever Verena approached, he brought his naked legs together primly, like a young girl. Neighbors, summoned by our bright windows, came softly inquiring. Verena spoke to them on the porch: her sister, Miss Dolly, she'd suffered a stroke. Doctor Carter would allow none of us in her room, and we accepted this, even Catherine, who, when she'd set ablaze the last light, stood leaning her head against Dolly's door.

There was in the hall a hat tree with many antlers, and on one [illegible] Dolly's velvet hat hung there, and at sunrise, as breezes trickled through the house, the [illegible] ruffled its quivering veil.

Then I knew as good as anything that Dolly had left us. Some moments past she'd gone by unseen,

proved not to be silver but gold. "Of course that's better, isn't it? Gold, like a king's ransom. Only do see what else I've found." It was a shoebox secured with twine. "My valuables," she said, opening it under the lamp. A hollowed honeycomb was demonstrated against the light, a hornet's nest and a clove-stuck orange that age had robbed of its aroma. She showed me a blue perfect jaybird's egg cradled in cotton.

"I was too principled. So Catherine stole the egg for me: it was her Christmas present." She smiled; to me her face seemed a moth suspended beside the lamp's chimney, as daring, as destructible. "Charlie said that love is a chain of love. I hope you listened and understood him. Because when you can love one thing," she held the blue egg as preciously as the Judge had held a leaf, "you can love another, and that is owning, that is something to live with. You can forgive everything. Well," she sighed, "we're not getting you painted. I want to amaze Catherine, we'll tell her that while we slept the little people finished your suit. She'll have a fit."

Again the courthouse clock was floating its message, each note like a banner stirring above the chilled and sleeping town. "I know it tickles," she said, drawing a branch of ribs across my chest, "but I'll make a mess if you don't hold still." She dipped the brush and skated it along the sleeves, the trousers, designing golden bones for my arms and legs. "You must remember all the compliments, there should be many," she said as she immodestly observed her work. "Oh dear, oh dear." She hugged herself, her laughter rollicked in the rafters. "Don't you see?"

For I was not unlike the man who painted himself into a corner. Freshly gilded front and back, I was

trapped inside the suit a fine fix for which I blamed her with a pointing finger

"You have to whirl," she teased "Whirling will dry you" She blissfully extended her arms and turned in slow ungainly circles across the shadows of the attic floor, her plain kimono billowing and her thin feet wobbling in their slippers It was as though she had collided with another dancer she stumbled, a hand on her forehead, a hand on her heart

Far on the horizon of sound a train whistle howled, and it wakened me to the bewilderment puckering her eyes the contractions shaking her face With my arms around her, and the paint bleeding its pattern against her, I called Verena, somebody help me!

Dolly whispered, "Hush now, hush"

Houses at night announce catastrophe by their sudden pitiable radiance Catherine dragged from room to room switching on lights unused for years Shivering inside my wrecked costume I sat in the glare of the entrance hall sharing a bench with the Judge He had come at once wearing only a rain- [illegible] Whenever Verena [illegible] ed legs together [illegible] ors summoned by [illegible] inquiring Verena spoke to them on the porch her sister, Miss Dolly, she'd suffered a stroke Doctor Carter would allow none of us in her room and we accepted this, even Catherine who when she'd set ablaze the last light, stood leaning her head against Dolly's door

There was in the hall a hat tree with many antlers and a mirror Dolly's velvet hat hung there, and at sunrise as breezes trickled through the house, the mirror reflected its quivering veil

Then I knew as good as anything that Dolly had left us Some moments past she'd gone by unseen,

place She was a sorry cook She let the kitchen's geranium plant perish I had approved of Verena hiring her I thought it would bring Catherine back to work

On the contrary, Catherine showed no interest in rouling the new girl For she'd retired to her house in the vegetable garden She had taken the radio with her and was very comfortable. "I've put down the load, and it s down to stay I'm after my leisure," she said Leisure fattened her her feet swelled she had

rustled in her lap Until she became too gross, she contrived to squeeze herself into clothes that had belonged to Dolly it was as though, in this way, she kept her friend with her

Our visits together were an ordeal and I made them grudgingly resenting it that she depended on me for company I let a day slip by without seeing her then three a whole week once When I returned after an absence I imagined the silences in which we sat her offhand manner were meant reproachfully, I was too conscience-ridden to realize the truth, which was that she didn't care whether or not I came One afternoon she proved it Simply, she removed the cotton wads that jacked up her jaws Without the cotton her speech was as unintelligible to me as it ordinarily was to others It happened while I was making an excuse to shorten my call She lifted the lid of a pot bellied stove and spit the cotton into the fire and her cheeks caved in she looked starved I think now this was not a vengeful gesture it was intended to let me know that I was under no obliga-

proved not to be silver but gold "Of course that's better, isn't it? Gold like a king's ransom Only do see what else I've found It was a shoebox secured with twine "My valuables," she said, opening it under the lamp A hollowed honeycomb was demonstrated against the light a hornet's nest and a clove-stuck orange that age had robbed of its aroma She showed me a blue perfect jaybird's egg cradled in cotton

"I was too principled So Catherine stole the egg for me it was her Christmas present She smiled to me her face seemed a moth suspended beside the lamp's chimney as daring as destructible "Charlie said that love is a chain of love I hope you listened and understood him Because when you can love one thing," she held the blue egg as preciously as the Judge had held a leaf "you can love another, and that is owning that is something to live with You can forgive everything Well" she sighed, "we're not getting you painted I want to amaze Catherine, we'll tell her that while we slept the little people finished your suit She'll have a fit"

Again the courthouse clock was floating its message each note like a banner stirring above the chilled and sleeping town "I know it tickles," she said drawing a bunch of ribs across my chest "but I'll make a mess if you don't hold still" She dipped the brush and skated it along the sleeves the trousers designing golden bones for my arms and legs "You must remember all the compliments there should be many" she said as she immodestly observed her work "Oh dear oh dear" She hugged herself her laughter rollicked in the rafters "Don't you see"

For I was not unlike the man who painted himself into a corner Freshly gilded front and back, I was

place She was a sorry cook She let the kitchen's ... ed of Verena hir... ... me back to work.

On the contrary Catherine showed no interest in routing the new girl For she'd retired to her house in the vegetable garden She had taken the radio with her and was very comfortable "I've put down the load, and it's down to stay I'm after my leisure," she said. Leisure fattened her her feet swelled, she had to cut slits in her shoes She developed exaggerated versions of Dolly's habits such as a craving for sweet foods she had her suppers delivered from the drug store two quarts of ice cream Candy wrappers rustled in her lap Until she became too gross she contrived to squeeze herself into clothes that had belonged to Dolly it was as though in this way, she kept her friend with her

Our visits together were an ordeal, and I made them grudgingly resenting it that she depended on me for company I let a day slip by without seeing her then three a whole week once When I returned after an absence I imagined the silences in which we sat her offhand manner were meant reproachfully, I was too conscience ridden to realize the truth, which was that she didn't care whether or not I came One afternoon she proved it Simply she removed the cotton wads that puffed up her jaws Without the cotton her speech was as unintelligible to me as it ordinarily was to others It happened while I was making an excuse to shorten my call She lifted the lid of a pot bellied stove and spit the cotton into the fire and her cheeks caved in she looked starved I think now this was not a vengeful gesture it was ... me know that I was under no obliga

and in my imagination I followed her. She had crossed the square, had come to the church, now she'd reached the hill. Then Indian grass gleamed below her, she had that far to go.

It was a journey I made with Judge Cool the next September. During the intervening months we had not often encountered each other—once we met on the square and he said to come see him any time I felt like it. I meant to, yet whenever I passed Miss Bell's boarding house I looked the other way.

I've read that past and future are a spiral, one coil containing the next and predicting its theme. Perhaps this is so; but my own life has seemed to me more a series of closed circles, rings that do not evolve with the freedom of a spiral: for me to get from one to the other has meant a leap, not a glide. What weakens me is the lull between, the wait before I know where to jump. After Dolly died I was a long while dangling.

My own idea was to have a good time.

I hung around Phil's Cafe winning free beers on the pinball machine: it was illegal to serve me beer, but Phil had it on his mind that someday I would inherit Verena's money and maybe set him up in the hotel business. I slicked my hair with brilliantine and chased off to dances in other towns, shined flashlights and threw pebbles at girls' windows late at night. I knew a Negro in the country who sold a brand of gin called Yellow Devil. I courted anyone who owned a car.

Because I didn't want to spend a waking moment in the *Talbo* house. It was too thick with air that didn't move. Some stranger occupied the kitchen, a pigeon-toed colored girl who sang all day, the wavery singing of a child bolstering its spirit in an ominous

tion: the future was something she preferred not to share.

Occasionally *Riley* rode me around—but I couldn't count on him or his car, neither were much available since he'd become a man of affairs. He had a team of tractors clearing ninety acres of land he'd bought on the outskirts *of town, he planned to build houses* there. Several locally *important* persons were impressed by another *scheme* of his: he thought the town should put up a silkmill in which every citizen would be a *stockholder*; aside from the possible profits, having an industry would increase our population. There was an enthusiastic editorial in the paper about this proposal: it went on to say that the town should be proud of having produced a man of young Henderson's enterprise. He grew a *mustache*; he rented an office, and his sister Elizabeth worked as his secretary. *Maude Riordan* was installed at the State University, and almost every week-end he drove his sisters over there: it was supposed to be because the girls were so fond of Maude. The engagement of Miss Maude Riordan to Mr. Riley Henderson was announced in the *Courier* on April

tering day, heatwaves jiggled like a sound graph of the celebrating Baptist bells and the rest of summer, a vista rigid as the noon street, lengthened before me Summer, another autumn, winter again not a spiral but a circle confined as the umbrella's shadow If I ever were to make the leap—with a heartskip I made it "Verena, I want to go away"

We were at the garden gate, "I know I do myself," she said closing her umbrella "I d hoped to make a trip with Dolly I wanted to show her the ocean" Verena had seemed a tall woman because of her authoritative carriage now she stooped slightly, her head nodded I wondered that I ever could have been so afraid of her for she'd grown feminine, fearful, she spoke of prowlers she burdened the doors with bolts and spiked the roof with lightning rods It had been her custom the first of every month to stalk around collecting in person the various rents owed her when she stopped doing this it caused an uneasiness in the town people felt wrong without their rainy day The women said she's got no family, she's lost without her sister their husbands blamed Dr Morris Ritz he knocked the gumption out of her, they said and, much as they had quarreled with Verena held it against him Three years ago, when I returned to this town my first task was to sort the papers of the Talbo estate, and among Verena's private possessions her keys her pictures of Maudie Laura Murphy I found a postcard It was dated two months after Dolly died at Christmas and it was from R

u even cast an inward and agonized gaze, and I remembered how her eyes watering in the brassy sunshine of Riley's wedding day, had straightened

tion: the future was something she preferred not to share.

Occasionally Riley rode me around—but I couldn't count on him or his car, neither were much available since he'd become a man of affairs. He had a team of tractors clearing ninety acres of land he'd bought on the outskirts of town: he planned to build houses there. Several locally important persons were impressed by another scheme of his: he thought the town should put up a silk mill in which every citizen would be a stockholder: aside from the possible profits, having an industry would increase our population. There was an enthusiastic editorial in the paper about this proposal; it went on to say that the town should be proud of having produced a man of young Henderson's enterprise. He grew a mustache; he rented an office, and his sister Elizabeth worked as his secretary. Maude Riordan was installed at the State University, and almost every week-end he drove his sisters over there: it was supposed to be because the girls were so fond of Maude. The engagement of Miss Maude Riordan to Mr. Riley Henderson was announced in the *Courier* on April Fool's Day.